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A0518 -- May. 01, 2005 – Revelation 2:8-11 – Smyrna: Church of Martyrdom

This letter is unique in that it lacks one element of our common structure. It contains...

Recipient, Destination, and Description of Christ (2:8)
Commendation (2:9)
Exhortation (2:10-11a)
Promise (2:11b)

But you'll notice it lacks any "condemnation". Christ had nothing negative to say about the church in Smyrna but they are merely exhorted not to fear and to remain faithful even to death. Thus, Smyrna is the Church of Martyrdom.

Recipient, Destination, and Description of Christ (2:8)

conj art DSM art prep DSF GSF 2SAAImp
proAPN 3SPAI art NSM
***Revelation 2:8 Kai. tw// avgge,lw/ th/j evn Smu,rnh/ evkklhsi,aj gra,yon\ Ta,de le,gei o`
prw/toj***

conj art NSM NSM 3SAMI NSM conj 3SAAI
kai. o` e;scatoj(o]j evge,neto nekro.j kai. e;zhsen

Translation 2:8 And to the messenger of the church in Smyrna write, The first and the last, who came to be dead and lived, says this:

The introduction of this letter is the same as that of the Ephesian letter (2:1) except this church and messenger are located in **Smyrna** and the verse begins with **And**, as do the other five letters (2:12, 1; 3:1, 7, 17).

The recipient of this letter is not an angel but a human messenger who is a spiritual representative of the **church**.

The destination of the letter is the **church in Smyrna**. The word **Smyrna** means “bitter” in the Greek, “certainly an appropriate description for the lot of Christians who lived there”.ⁱ These Christians experienced severe persecutions and hardships unlike anything American Christians have yet experienced. The Greek word *Smurna* translates the Hebrew word for “myrrh” which was used for embalming the dead. The name is quite appropriate because, according to v. 10, these Christians were destined for martyrdom.

The city of **Smyrna** is located about 35-40 miles north of Ephesus. After visiting Ephesus the six remaining messengers apparently headed north along the main road en route to Smyrna (1:11).

The city was located on a deep and protected gulf on the east side of the Aegean Sea which was fed by the Hermus River. All the trade from the valley to the city came into the harbor and went out from there. It was a very wealthy city and of all seven churches it was easily the most beautiful. It was known by many as the ideal city on earth. The city was surrounded by sturdy walls and on the Pagos Hill above the city were “stately public buildings that...were called “the crown of Smyrna.””ⁱⁱ Today Smyrna is known as Izmir and is populated by several hundred thousand people.

In John’s day, idol worship and pagan temples were prevalent but the protecting deity of the city was Cybele (Mother of Sybeline). The Greeks identified Cybele as Nemesis, the Greek goddess of retributive justice and Smyrna was the only city in the Greek world where she was worshipped.

When Revelation was written by John, Domitian was Emperor of Rome (81-96AD), and he made emperor worship mandatory for every Roman citizen. “Failure to comply meant death. Each year every citizen had to burn incense on Caesar’s altar, after which he was issued a certificate. To be without a certificate...was to risk discovery and the death penalty.”ⁱⁱⁱ Therefore, Smyrna was one of the most dangerous places for a Christian to live. If anyone refused to confess “Caesar is Lord” along with burning incense on the altar he was persecuted heavily or executed. History records that there were mass executions of Christians on a number of occasions. “Joining hands with the Romans to oppose Christianity was a very large Jewish community in Smyrna. The Jews repeatedly informed against Christians or incited the local governor to attack them.”^{iv} Thus, Smyrna is known as the Church of Martyrdom and it is no wonder that Jesus’ message to this church “drips” with words of encouragement to believers in a hostile situation.

The description of Christ as the first and the last, who came to be dead and lives comes from chapter 1:17, 18. First he repeats the end of 1:17 where He is described as **the first and the last. The first and the last denotes His eternity**. Second, he repeats part of verse 18 with some minor changes. Here he is the one who **came to be dead and lived**. He came to be dead on the cross in His humanity yet He lived by way of the resurrection. It was a real death in His perfect and full humanity and it was a real resurrection in His perfect and full humanity. In His deity He is eternal, **the first and the last** but in His humanity He **came to be dead and lived**. This description is very fitting for the Christians at Smyrna. They were about to be martyred. Knowing that the Son is eternal and that in His humanity he had been martyred and defeated death should encourage these believers to stay faithful unto death.

Commendation (2:9)

Revelation 2:9 oi=da, sou th.n qli/yin kai. th.n ptwcei,an(avlla. plou,sioj ei=(kai. th.n blasfmi,an evk tw/n lego,ntwn VIoudai,ouj ei=nai e`autou.j kai. ouvk eivsi.n avlla. sunagwgh. tou/ satana/

Translation 2:9 I know your tribulation, even your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say they themselves are Jews and are not but are the synagogue of Satan.

Like at Ephesus, Christ, the omniscient one, and symbolized as the one who walks among the churches (2:1), **knows**. What does he know about **Smyrna**? He knows their **tribulation** (*thlipsis*). He's not talking about the 7-year tribulation but He's talking about the general tribulation that all genuine Christians who stand for the truth, undergo to some degree. It would probably be better translated **affliction** here to avoid any confusion. These Christians in **Smyrna** have a high degree of **affliction**.

This **affliction** is explained by two other things: **poverty** (*ptocheia*) and **blasphemy** (*blasphemia*). There are two words for **poverty** in the Greek. The Greek word *penia* means having nothing superfluous, nothing extra, but the second Greek word, and the one used here, is *ptocheia* and it means having nothing at all! The **Smyrnan's** had nothing at all because of the heavy persecutions they were enduring. There is little doubt that if a Christian in **Smyrna** was found without a certificate verifying that he had confessed "Caesar as Lord" and burned incense on the altar that the official could often be bribed by material possessions or, more likely, the Christian's were robbed by Gentile mobs and Jews. The point is this; they were in abject poverty because of their faith in Jesus. But Jesus strongly contrasts this (*avlla*) by saying **but you are rich**. This is exactly the opposite of the

case at Laodicea where they say, “I am rich” but Jesus says they are “poor” (3:17). While the Smyrnan’s have no material goods at all, they had possessions where it counted, in the spiritual realm. Spiritually they were the **rich** and famous in God’s annals. Material possessions are never the ultimate standard for value. Materials have use but finally all material things will burn. We can’t take any of them with us after we die. But spiritual things have use both in the here and now as well as the future. They will last forever. Even though these Smyrnan Christians had been beaten, robbed, and thrown in prison, spiritually they were **rich**. They had it where it counted. I hope you have it where it counts and not just in your pocket. I hope you have the mentality that you would rather be a materially poor, wretched creature and have Jesus Christ as Savior than a materially rich, “good for nothing” without Jesus Christ as Savior, like the Laodiceans.

Lastly, Jesus says that He knows **the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not**. **The blasphemy** probably refers to slander against the Christians. It was this slander against the Christians that got them in trouble with the Roman authorities. The most prominent slander in **Smyrna** were Jews who informed the Roman authorities of Christians who refused to worship Caesar. Who are the one’s **who say they are Jews and are not** (cf 3:9)? The plainest sense of these words means that they are physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob but they are not spiritual descendents of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Gal 3:7; Rom 9:6-8). They are Jews in an outward sense but not in an inward sense. They had the physical circumcision of the flesh but not the spiritual circumcision of the heart (Rom 2:28-29). In the NT a true Jew is one who is a physical descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as well as one who believes in the Messiahship of Jesus. Believing in Jesus as Messiah is what completes a Jew. But these slanderers claimed to be Jews while they were not. They claimed to be Jews simply on the basis of being physical descendants of Abraham (Rom 9:6-8). But Christ does not recognize them as true Jews because they have not trusted in Him as Messiah. Therefore they are not spiritual descendants of Abraham. These false Jews were persecuting the Christians by exposing them to the Roman authorities who were then imprisoning them or executing them. According to Christ they are **not Jews but a synagogue of Satan**. They are doing Satan’s work persecuting the Christians at **Smyrna**. A **synagogue** was a place where physical Jews gathered to read Torah and commentary. Christ says these false Jews were not a godly **synagogue** but a **synagogue of Satan**. What they were doing was gathering at the **synagogue** to plot assaults on the Church, to carry out Satan’s will rather than God’s will. Therefore, they are a **synagogue of Satan**. When Paul was an unbeliever he thought He was doing the will of God by persecuting the Church (Acts 22:4). It was only later that he realized He was doing Satan’s will and not God’s will. Persecuting the body of Christ is persecuting the head of

the body, Christ (Acts 22:7-8). Christ's evaluation of those who plot to persecute Christians is that they are a **synagogue of Satan**.

Exhortation (2:10-11a)

Revelation 2:10 mhde.n fobou/ a] me,lleij pa,sceinÅ ivdou. me,llei ba,llein o` dia,boloj evx u`mw/n eivj fulakh.n i[na peirasqh/te kai. e[xete qli/yin h`merw/n de,kaÅ gi,nou pisto.j a;cri qana,tou(kai. dw,sw soi to.n ste,fanon th/j zwh/jÅ

Translation 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 may be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Significantly, there is the striking absence of any 'condemnation' for the spiritual representative or the church in Smyrna. However, this church is exhorted **not to fear** what they **are about to suffer** and to **be faithful until death**. The motivation to be faithful is a gift; **the crown of life**.

Apparently the church feared that things were going to get even worse. And they were right, things were going to get worse. But Christ tells them **Do not fear what you are about to suffer**. Instead of telling them not to worry because no future suffering is coming He reveals what it is they **are about to suffer**. It is interesting that that Christ has total knowledge of their future suffering and is sovereign over it but Satan is the author of their suffering. Apparently, Satan has requested of God that he work through the Romans and the Jews to imprison these Christians **for ten days**. Satan's goal is to increase the pressure causing them to depart from Christ which would be sinful. This is very similar to the issues in Job except Job was not told what was going to take place in advance. Christians must understand that God permits such trials to take place but He is not the author of such trials. The **devil** hoped to cause them to reject Christ by casting them into intense physical persecution. Christ tells them in advance that their sufferings are about to increase but His knowledge of the future should give them the confidence **not to fear**, that He is still in control. What is about to take place is this: one by one the Roman authorities will take some of their congregation and cast them **into prison**. The reason Satan is doing this is **so that they may be tested**. There are two words in the Greek for **test**. The first word *dokimazo* is used of testing a person in order to approve of them. But that word is not used here. The second word, and the one used here is *peirazo*, and is used of testing a person by enticing them to fall into sin. So, Satan's purpose is to entice the Christians by imprisonment to fall into sin, to renounce their faith in Christ. This test would last 10 days. There is no reason to resort to a symbolic interpretation of the **ten days**. The context won't

support it. Chapters 2-3 are epistolary in style rather than prophetic. Therefore, this simply refers to 10 days of imprisonment within that generation. A short term of imprisonment would give them the confidence to endure it to the “bitter” end. Lastly, Jesus gives them some motivation to remain true to Him during the 10 days of imprisonment and persecution.

Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life. They have been faithful to the point of abject poverty, having nothing at all. Now they are to keep on (PMImp) being faithful even unto death. This is the ultimate sacrifice and proof of loyalty to Christ as a disciple. “Christians should not shrink from dying for Christ’s sake, even if the death is to be a violent one.”^v During the tribulation there will be many such martyrs and around the world right now Christians are being martyred by the hundreds. It has been said that there were more martyrs in the 20th century than in all 19 of the previous centuries of Christianity. Tertullian once said that “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church”. His point was that Satan wants to persecute and kill Christians in hope of killing the Church and her witness for Christ. But the more he persecutes the Church the stronger the witness becomes and the more Christianity grows.

Martyrdom^{vi}

Matthew 16:18 "I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.

The church is impenetrable by the methods and madness of men. Of great importance I tell you that eleven of the twelve apostles were martyrs for Jesus Christ. They did not merely think they saw the risen Christ they knew it to the point of horrible deaths executed by horrible men driven by the satanic spirit of their age. Of the twelve apostles John alone escaped martyrdom. Let’s look at some of these accounts...

James the Great

The martyrdom of James, son of Zebedee and half-brother of our Lord Jesus Christ: Clemens Alexandrinus says that “as James was led to the place of martyrdom, his accuser was brought to repent of his conduct by the apostle's extraordinary courage and undauntedness, and fell down at his feet to request his pardon, professing himself a Christian, and resolving that James should not receive the crown of martyrdom alone. Hence they were both beheaded at the same time. Thus did the first apostolic martyr

cheerfully and resolutely receive that cup, which he had told our Savior he was ready to drink...These events took place A.D. 44.

James the Less

Author of the epistle of James. "At the age of ninety-four he was beat and stoned by the Jews; and finally had his brains dashed out with a fuller's club."

Mark

Mark was dragged to pieces by the people of Alexandria, at the great solemnity of Serapis their idol, ending his life under their merciless hands.

Bartholomew

Preached in several countries, and having translated the Gospel of Matthew into the language of India, he propagated it in that country. He was at length cruelly beaten and then crucified by the impatient idolaters.

And yet, notwithstanding all these continual persecutions and horrible punishments, the Church daily increased, deeply rooted in the doctrine of the apostles watered plentifully with the blood of saints.

Persecution under Julius the Apostate

Constantius, dying the year 361, Julian succeeded him, and had no sooner attained the imperial dignity than he renounced Christianity and embraced paganism, which had for some years fallen into great disrepute.

Julian determined to examine a man named Basil, when that holy man was brought before him the emperor did every thing in his power to dissuade him from persevering in the faith. Basil not only continued as firm as ever, but, with a prophetic spirit foretold the death of the emperor, and that he should be tormented in the other life. Enraged at what he heard, Julian commanded that the body of Basil should be torn every day in seven different parts, until his skin and flesh were entirely mangled. This inhuman sentence was executed with rigor, and the martyr breathed his last under its severities, on June 28, A.D. 362.

The persecution raged dreadfully about the latter end of the year 363...it is necessary to remark in general, that in Palestine many were burnt alive, others were dragged by their feet through the streets naked until they expired; some were scalded to death, many stoned, and great numbers had their brains beaten out with clubs. In Alexandria, innumerable were the martyrs who suffered by the sword, burning, crucifixion and stoning. In Arethusa, several were ripped open, and corn being put into their bellies, swine were brought to feed therein, which, in devouring the grain, likewise devoured the entrails of the martyrs, and in Thrace, Emilianus was burnt at a stake; and Domitius murdered in a cave, whither he had fled for refuge.

Moving to the time of the Reformation I will read two more accounts.

John Wickliffe

Wickliffe had some cause to give his executioners thanks. They at least spared him until he was dead and allowed him to lie in the grave in his sepulchre for 41 years before they ungraved him, and turned him from earth to ashes; which ashes they took and threw into the river. And so was he resolved into three elements, earth, fire, and water, thinking thereby utterly to extinguish and abolish both the name and doctrine of Wickliffe forever. Not much unlike the example of the old Pharisees and sepulchre knights, who, when they had brought the Lord unto the grave, thought to make him sure never to rise again. But these and all godly men know, that as there is no counsel against the Lord, so there is no keeping down of truth, but it will spring up and come out of dust and ashes, as appeared right well in this man; for though they dug up his body, burned his bones, and drowned his ashes, yet the Word of God and the truth of his doctrine, with the fruit and success thereof, they could not burn.

William Tyndale

At last, after much reasoning, when no reason would serve, although he deserved no death, he was condemned by virtue of the emperor's decree, made in the assembly at Augsburg. Brought forth to the place of execution, he was tied to the stake, strangled by the hangman, and afterwards consumed with fire, at the town of Vilvorde, A.D. 1536; crying at the stake with a fervent zeal, and a loud voice, "Lord! open the king of England's eyes."

Such was the power of his doctrine, and the sincerity of his life, that during the time of his imprisonment (which endured a year and a half), he converted, it is said, his keeper, the keeper's daughter, and others of his household.

What is the reward for such martyrs? **the crown of life**. This is a *stephanos* crown. There are two types of crowns in Scripture. Royal crowns, such as the crowns Christ wears (*diadema*) and victory crowns, such as an athlete would wear (*stephanos*). The kind of

crown here is a victor's crown. In John's day the Greek games were very popular and Smyrna was actually famous for its games. The winning athletes would receive a garland of victory. These garlands would immediately come to mind for the Christians in Smyrna. The Christian life is often described in terms of an athletic contest through which we must persevere and have endurance. Some of the Christians at Smyrna are about to be cast into their most extreme trial, imprisonment for 10 days which may be accompanied by unthinkable torture techniques. They are encouraged here that their faithfulness unto death will result in Christ Himself giving them **the crown of life**. The **crown of life** actually stands for "eternal life". For the Christian, death is the entrance into life. The Christian life is full of temptation and weariness, but we should endure to the end that we may enter into the life God has promised us.

Promise (2:11b)

Revelation 2:11 ~O e;cwn ou=j avkousa,tw ti, to. pneu/ma le,gei tai/j evkklhsi,aijÅ ~O nikw/n ouv mh. avdikhqh/| evk tou/ qana,tou tou/ deute,rouÅ

Translation 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 the revealer and illuminator of these things to our mind, believers are to **hear what the Spirit says to** all seven of **the churches**. Although the other churches are not in this hostile situation they may someday be and these words would be applicable to them as well.

Lastly we have the promise to the overcomer. Remember, the overcomer is the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God (1 John 5:4, 5). So, this is a general promise made to all genuine Christians. The promise is that they will not be hurt by the **second death**. What is the **second death**? Turn over to Revelation 20:14 "*Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.*" How many believers are going to be thrown into the *lake of fire*? Zero. The 'second death' is reserved for all unbelievers (Rev 20:6, 14; 21:7, 8). The promise is particularly applicable to the Christians in Smyrna because they could be certain that the death they were about to experience would never be repeated. They would not be hurt by the second death because being an overcomer they were exempt from it. The second death is much worse than a physical death because it is eternal death; eternal separation from God, and eternal separation from God is not the annihilation of a person but a conscious unending punishment in utter darkness.

There were many Christian martyrs in Smyrna; men and women who were faithful to death. There have been many more martyrs since that day. And there will be more martyrs in the Tribulation than any period yet. The persecutions will be horrific. Many will undergo “bitter” deaths but will win the “victory” and receive from the Lord Jesus Christ the **crown of eternal life**. These are the true overcomers who by faith in Jesus Christ enter into rest. In this life, Paul says “*For our fight is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.*”¹³ *Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.*¹⁴ *Stand firm therefore, HAVING GIRDED YOUR LOINS WITH TRUTH, and HAVING PUT ON THE BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS,*¹⁵ *and having shod YOUR FEET WITH THE PREPARATION OF THE GOSPEL OF PEACE;*¹⁶ *in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.*¹⁷ *And take THE HELMET OF SALVATION, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”* So take up your armor Christian and stand firm till death.

ⁱ Thomas, Robert, *Revelation: An Exegetical Commentary, Rev 1-7* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1992), 158.

ⁱⁱ Thomas, Robert, *Revelation: An Exegetical Commentary, Rev 1-7* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1992), 159.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas, Robert, *Revelation: An Exegetical Commentary, Rev 1-7* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1992), 160.

^{iv} Thomas, Robert, *Revelation: An Exegetical Commentary, Rev 1-7* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1992), 160.

^v Thomas, Robert, *Revelation: An Exegetical Commentary, Rev 1-7* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1992), 171.

^{vi} All martyr accounts from *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* by John Foxe.

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