
Into Thy Word Bible Study in Revelation

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Revelation 2: 8-11: "The Church of Smyrna"

General idea: Smyrna is a Greek word for *myrrh*, a bitter herb used both as an anointing oil and for embalming, and was one of the gifts the wise men brought to Jesus as a young child (Ex. 30:23; Esth. 2:12; Psalm 45:8; Prov. 7:17; Matt. 2:11; John 19:39). The churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia were the only two of the seven that were fully praised by Christ.

Even though Smyrna was praised, they were treading on dangerous ground. They were starting to be bitter as their name applies. After facing much persecution, they became belligerent against Christ and turned against one another, forsaking their call and duty. They had the opportunity to learn and grow from their situation, but instead, they chose bitterness and strife. They embraced fearfulness instead of faithfulness.

Like the church of Smyrna, we will all face sufferings and trials. It is not the questioning of them to help us cope, but how we learn and deal with them that help shape our spiritual formation. The trials we face will be used to enrich our own lives and make us a beacon to help others in their trials, too. When we cave in to our fears, we will only be insolvent in real poverty, bankrupted spiritually because of our opposition to Christ as our Lord and Sustainer.

John is grabbing their attention by reminding them (and us) who Christ is and what He has done. He is not just a Savior and/or best Friend; He gives us life, holds our lives, and will judge our lives. He is the One who overcame life and death for our benefit, and when we seek to run His church our way, we embarrass and dishonor Him and His Way. Jesus lived life in purity and sinlessness for our benefit, to enable us to have eternal life and partake in His fellowship. He knows us more intimately than we can imagine and desires that we be in Him and glorify Him fully. Yet, we tend to fill His call with the void of our stubbornness, recklessness, and selfishness. Yet, He is there, guiding us with a beacon that says *I know your pain, I felt your pain, I have experienced your pain and I feel your pain now, too*. He has taken our pain away. The tribulations we face are not the things that can derail us from Him; rather, they can form us more in Him in maturity and character.

Vs. 8-10: These letters to the seven churches echo the good, the bad, and the ugly in all churches. They are styled similarly to O.T. Prophets and their oracles against the corrupt and the call to repentance, as in "let's get it right" (Isa. 13-23; Jer. 46-51; Ezek. 25-32; Amos 2-4). Jesus directly challenges them, and us, in how we operate our church, what we doing right, where we are straying, what is heinous about us, and what we can do to get back on track. Christ is here, caring,

and is present in our church! He is passionately concerned with what we do and how we do it, and wants to be intimately involved (Matt. 7:20; 10:16; 2 Tim. 2:15; 1 John 4:1).

- *Church* means a body of believers who come together for worship, instructions, and to serve. This does not refer to a building. Many churches have many different types of people, liturgies, and government. Many are not always true Christians or have God's interests at heart; rather, they are driven by personal agendas or trends that are contrary to the precepts of our Lord. Jesus is attacking our placing personal agendas and power struggles over His lead!
- *Smyrna*, now called *Izmir* in Turkey, was a beautiful, large, prosperous, and loyal city and the center of the Emperor worship practice. Furthermore, there was a tough, antagonistic Jewish Synagogue there, giving the Christians a squeeze in the middle of persecution and hostility. The city officials were betraying and falsely accusing the Christians. The Jews kicked them out of their fellowship, a scandalous act for a Jew. This Smyrna church was composed of people who were burnt out and were starting to lose their faithfulness. Thus, instead of continuing to fight the ravages of persecution with trust and obedience to Christ, they decided to ignore His precepts and do their own thing. Even though they professed to worship and honor Christ, they did not do so fully in their deeds and attitudes (2 Cor. 4:4). They were once a vibrant, healthy church but were starting to die. This city of Smyrna was destroyed and laid in ruins, then rebuilt, as in resurrected (800-300 BC). The application is that a dead or dying church with faithful, Christ-empowered people can be turned around and resurrected! John's disciple, Polycarp, became the Bishop there and did resurrect it until he was martyred 30 or so years later (or at this time, depending how you date Revelation—another proof for a late date for Revelation if he is the "Angel").
- *I know your afflictions*. In times of suffering, we may think that Christ is absent, but He is not. He is fully with us!
- *Poverty* has two meanings: being physically poor and helpless, and being rich in faith (2 Cor. 8:6; James 1:9). It may, perhaps, mean the financial sufferings they were going through. It also refers to a hunger for righteousness and seeking the depths of God's love and virtue, and in so doing, being committed to continue allowing yourself to grow in maturity, to be transformed, and to be renewed. At the same time, it is not allowing personal circumstances to disrupt your faith (Matt. 5:3-6; Rom. 12:1-3; 2 Cor. 8:8-12; Phil. 2:5-9).
- *Rich*. John reminds them that they are rich when they are the elect/chosen in Him (Luke 6:20; James 2:5). In contrast, the Laodicean church thought they were rich when they were actually poor, as bankrupted in faith (Rev. 3:17).

- *Who say they are Jews.* A public profession of faith or a genetic legacy must always be backed up with real, authentic faith and deeds (Rom. 2:28-29).
- *Synagogue of Satan,* meaning being apostate is referring to the local Synagogue and of Jews who were very antagonistic to the Christians as they refused to acknowledge Christ as the Messiah and who called the Christians a Synagogue of Satan. This does not refer to an actual Christian “church;” rather, it is a metaphor meaning to oppose Christ, as in refusing to heed the precepts of God’s Word and call, and doing the opposite, which is one’s own will and agenda. The Church of Smyrna was starting to doubt that Christ was coming back so they taught the opposite of His instructions. This is a parody of who Satan is and how he operates. The question we have to ask ourselves is are we operating to the opposite tune from what Jesus commands, as this Synagogue and the church of Smyrna were starting to? If so, we are being a church of Satan!
- *Devil.* Here, his name “diabolos” means accuser and slanderer (Zech 3:1; Job 1:6-12; 2:1-7; John 15:20; 2 Tim. 3:12; Rev. 12:10).
- *Prison* refers to a place of detention until a trial or execution took place, much like a city jail today.
- *Test you/testing...ten days* refers to Daniel 1:12 and the trials he faced. This means our trails will be limited and temporary (Matt. 5:11-12; James 1:2; 1 Pet. 1:7; 3:14). To say that this means ten waves of future persecutions or the ten emperors is a stretch, and does not take into account O.T. understandings.
- *Persecution* refers to the many Christians who were martyred for their faith.
- *Faithful.* Ironically, the city of Smyrna was known for their faithfulness to Rome, but its church started to withdraw their faithfulness to our Lord!
- *Crown of life* is not an actual crown. Rather, it represents our victory, a symbol of eternal life, and our reward in Christ for our faithfulness (Psalm 103:4; James 1:12; Rev. 3:11; 4:4, 10; 6:2; 9:7; 12:1-3; 13:1; 14:14; 19:12). The physical layout of the city of Smyrna was in the pattern of a crown, in conjunction with the Greek patron goddess “Cybele” of Smyrna who wore a crown incrustated with coins. This also referred to the “olive garland,” an athlete’s reward for victory. Jesus wants us to seek the real, true Crown, which is worn in our hearts and minds and affects our will and deeds. This is demonstrated when we seek to please Him and not our plans or profits. “Doing” church is all about glorying Christ, not satisfying its leadership or attendees!

Vs. 11: The perspective in each of these letters is not just about future happenings. Revelation is also a practical guidebook on how to run a successful church and how to avoid the potholes that make a bad church. Each of these seven churches had characteristics that are a template to any church you can worship in today. These churches were real “alive” and “dead” churches that yours, in its vision and operation, are a footprint thereof. So, which one is yours? Which one are you called to be among today?

- *He who has an ear.* God means what He says (Ezek. 33:30-32; James 1: 21-27; 2 Pet. 1: 3-11)! This also means that God fulfills His promises. Do you take His Word seriously, learning and applying it? If not, why not?
- *The churches* refers to the Seven Churches real, actual churches with tangible problems. The phrase is also a representation of all churches that have ever existed.
- *Second death.* The first death means when we physically die and then go into eternity for rewards and to wait for the resurrection and the everlasting life. This second death means that those who fail to accept Christ will also be resurrected, only to die again in the “lake of fire.” Some Jews, like the Sadducees, believed this was annihilation (John 5:28-29; Rev. 19:20; 20:10-15).

The troubles we face can cause us to fear so we seek to cover them up with our pride and/or bitterness. We try to go it alone when Christ is beckoning us to trust in Him, go His Way, and give our fears to Him. When we refuse to heed His call, it will just be a short time until we are thrown away, given to the devil, since we are working for him anyway. Ironically, our sufferings are far less of a venture and sentence than our poor choices. When we work our lives and church with our corrupt personal power we are in fact abandoning His power and Fruit. Consider this: when we are independent from Christ in our personal lives and in running our churches, we are forsaking and opposing Him. Thus, it is not that much of a stretch or even a job relocation to be a church of Satan, since we are already such a place. But, when we trust in Him, He will give us the strength to endure. When we are faithful, we become beacons of hope and encouragement to others, too. We will become lifesavers, thrown to those who are drowning. Christ will use us in the plights of others as hands to grab on to and pull others up when they are sinking. But, if we are not faithful, there is no outstretched hand, only missed opportunities and an infamy to a community, a life wasted, a church of dysfunction, and a crown of shame instead of a crown of life. God asks us to be conquerors and faithful witnesses to whom and what He is! We cannot do that as a church of Satan!

When we go through the troubles of life, we can either take shelter in Him or seek to go it alone in our fears and pride. When we seek to do His church on our own, we turn it into a church of evil, as diametrically opposed to Christ, as

Satan is opposed to Him. We may not be worshipping Satan, but when we run the church by our ways and agendas, we are, in fact, worshipping Satan, because Christ is not only ignored, He is being opposed! Smyrna was a church where people's agendas were in opposition to Christ's. They had sufferings to overcome and learn from, but most chose to run the course their way and tarnish His Way.

The Essential Inductive Questions (for more Inductive questions see Inductive Bible Study):

1. What does this passage say?
2. What does this passage mean?
3. What is God telling me?
4. How am I encouraged and strengthened?
5. Is there sin in my life for which confession and repentance is needed?
6. How can I be changed, so I can learn and grow?
7. What is in the way of these precepts affecting me? What is in the way of my listening to God?
8. How does this apply to me? What will I do about it?
9. What can I model and teach?
10. What does God want me to share with someone?

Additional Questions:

1. If someone slanders you, what do you do? What should you do? How can you better realize the fact that our trials will be limited and temporary?
2. Why is Smyrna being praised? Why are they treading on dangerous ground? What caused them to turn out to be a church of bitterness and strife?
3. Jesus is passionately concerned with how and what we do in our churches, and wants to be intimately involved. So, how is He involved in your church? What can be done to invite Him further into your church?
4. Why is it that when we seek to run "His" church "our" way, we embarrass and dishonor Him and His Way? Why do we do it? How do our stubbornness, recklessness, and selfishness contribute to a church's dysfunction? What would Jesus say to such a church?
5. How does the fact that Jesus knows your pain and feels your pain help you persevere in times of trials and confusion?
6. How do you demonstrate faithfulness? When we suffer, we may think that Christ is absent, but He is not. He is with us fully. How does this fact strengthen your faithfulness?

7. If this was your church, what could be done to make sure it did not die but be revived to its formerly healthy and vibrant ways?
8. An aspect of maturity is being slow to respond to accusation—as our Lord did. How does knowing that Christ, the Creator and Lord of the universe, approves you help you cope with “feeble mortals” telling you dishonorable things?
9. They were once a vibrant, healthy church that was now starting to die. The application is that a dead or dying church with faithful, Christ-empowered people can be resurrected. How can this give you hope for your church?
10. The question we have to ask ourselves is, are we operating to the opposite tune that Jesus commands as this Synagogue and the church of Smyrna were starting to?
11. How can the fact that Jesus knows us more intimately than we can imagine, and desires us to be in Him strengthen your faithfulness? What can you do to grow in this area and to glorify Him more fully?
12. What causes a Christian to become belligerent against Christ and a church to turn on one another, forsaking their call and duty? How does this ruin a church? How can such a church be turned around?

The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.
2 Corinthians 4:4