

Revelation 2:8-11 Smyrna's Synagogue of Satan

Review:

What does the word revelation mean? It means an unveiling or a revealing, in this case of events that were future to the original readers. **Read 1:1a, 3b.**

Outline: The book of Revelation has 22 chapters and can be divided into two parts (**1:19**):

Chapter 1-3—"things ... that are" (Epistles to the Seven Churches)

Chapters 4-22—"things ... that are to take place after this" (Prophecy)

In **1:12-18**, John had an awesome vision of Jesus. In the letters to the seven churches, various details of this vision were referred back to. Although John did not explain the meaning of the various details of the vision, the main thing is the plain thing. The overall impression made was clear: Jesus is Jehovah God and has complete control on human events. If you are one of His sheep, this is awesome. If you are outside the fold, this is awful.

Introduction: Today we shall learn from Jesus' message to the church in Smyrna. It is a little known fact that I grew up in Smyrna—*Georgia*! This Smyrna is located in modern-day Turkey.

- **Smyrna:** It is not known how the church in Smyrna was planted. As for the actual city, Smyrna:
 - 1) Is one of the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world. Its modern name is Izmir. Today's citizens are Islamic, but there are Christians there today.
 - 2) Was thirty-five miles north of Ephesus and, like Ephesus, was a port city on the Aegean Sea.
 - 3) Laid claim to be the birth place of Homer.
 - 4) Had a population estimated to have been around 200,000.
 - 5) Was described on ancient coins as "First of Asia in beauty and size."¹
 - 6) You can see the word myrrh in the name Smyrna. It is named for one of its main products, a sweet perfume called myrrh.²

******Which part of the initial vision (1:12-18) did Jesus refer to when He identified Himself to the church in Smyrna (2:8)?** He identified Himself as **1)** the first and last, and **2)** the one who died and came back to life (**1:7-8**), a reference to both His deity and His control over death.

Back in 1:8, the "Lord God" described Himself as the Alpha and the Omega. Here, in 2:8, Jesus identified Himself as the first and the last. What's the difference? There seems not to be much difference; both are claiming the same thing, which suggests the deity of Jesus. Jesus is the Lord God. Furthermore:

ESV Isaiah 44:6 Thus says ... the LORD of hosts: "I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god."

¹ Mounce, *Revelation*, 91.

² J. Hampton Keiahley, III, "Message to Smyrna (Rev 2:8-11)", Bible.org. Accessed December 06, 2020.

**** **Jesus identified Himself as the first and last, the one who died and came to life (2:8). What special relevance did this have for the believers in Smyrna (2:9-11)?** In 2:9-10, Jesus implied that some of them would soon be facing martyrdom. It was important for them to focus on the fact that Jesus is God and has conquered death. There is no need to fear the future.

Based on 2:9, what various troubles was the Smyrna church *already* facing? The church was facing **1) tribulation 2) poverty, and 3) Slander.**

1) “tribulation” (2:9): The Greek word here, *thlipsis* (θλίψις), originally and literally meant pressure, such as the crushing pressure from a weight.³ One can imagine that the Greek word might sound like the sound of grapes bursting in the vat under the pressure of being crushed. It means great affliction, trial, or distress; suffering. Fair warning:

ESV **2 Timothy 3:12** ... all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted ...

2) Smyrna was a prosperous city. Why were the believers there so poor (2:9)?

a) Perhaps only the lower social class was initially open to the Gospel.

b) Since their poverty was mentioned in association with the tribulation, it is likely that the poverty was the result of prejudice against Christians. In a hostile environment, it might have been hard to make a living.

Example: A neighbor of mine said he wanted to put a political sign in his yard, but feared it would hurt his wife’s real estate business. So too, simply being a Christian was bad for business.

c) It is also possible their property was confiscated by the government, as happened to the readers of the book of Hebrews:

ESV **Hebrews 10:34** ... you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.

In what sense were they were rich even though they were poor (2:9)? They had true, eternal, spiritual riches in heaven, which is far more important.

ESV **Matthew 5:11-12** Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven ...

3) What is slander (2:9)? To slander is to make a false and damaging statement about someone. The Greek is *blasphémia* (βλασφημία, “blasphemy”). To blasphemy is to slander God. This slander came from the unbelieving Jews, who considered it blasphemy for Christians to worship Jesus as Jehovah God incarnate. In general, early believers were often accused of such things as **1) cannibalism, 2) incest, 3) dividing families, 4) atheism, and 5) being disloyal to the government.**⁴

³ Barclay, *Revelation*, 95.

⁴ Barclay, *Revelation*, 98.

In what sense were these Jews not Jews (2:9)? Although they were physical descendants of Abraham, they were not his spiritual descendants. They had Abraham's flesh but not his faith.

ESV **Romans 2:28-29** ... no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly ... a Jew is one inwardly ...

ESV **John 8:37-44** "I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father." They answered him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. You are doing what your father did.... You are of your father the devil"

Application: Just as there were Jews who were not Jews, so too there are people claiming to be Christians who are not Christians. There is a difference between Christendom and Christianity (the Reformers spoke of the church within the church).⁵

How did Jesus describe the local synagogue (2:9)? Jesus said it was a synagogue of Satan.

- **"Satan" (2:9):** Satan is a proper name, transliterated from the Greek *satanas*, which in turn is a transliteration of the Hebrew *satan*. Technically, it means adversary or opponent.

Application: The Nazis and the KKK might misuse **2:9** to justify their anti-Semitism. One might as well be anti-Romanic since it was the Romans who actually crucified Jesus. The problem in this case was that it was the unbelieving Jews in Smyrna who were particularly active in persecuting the church, thus earning them the status of being a synagogue of Satan. It would be wrong to conclude that other unbelieving Jewish people are in league with Satan any more than any other unbelievers. There are plenty of churches of Satan, mosques of Satan, temples of the Tempter, and, for that matter, schools of Satan and businesses of Beelzebub. Any religion that rejects the biblical Jesus is ultimately teaching the doctrine of demons.

Based on 2:9, is God still in a covenant relationship with unbelieving Israel? God reckons His people based on their relation to Jesus, not genealogy.⁶ As regards the gospel, unbelieving Jews are "enemies" of the church (**Ro 11:28**). However, because of His promises to Abraham, there is an elect remnant from among the physical Jews who will come to faith in Christ (**Ro 11:28-31**). Paul is an example of one such chosen Jew (**Ro 11:1**).

2:10

What did Jesus predict in 2:10? He predicted that the future held **1)** suffering, **2)** prison, **3)** tribulation, and **4)** death.

Despite the coming suffering and death, how did Jesus encourage them to respond (2:10)? He encouraged them to respond **1)** by not fearing and **2)** by being faithful unto death.

⁵ "Church Invisible", Wikipedia.com. Accessed December 03, 2020.

⁶ Dennis, *ESV Study*, 2466.

ESV **Luke 12:4** ... do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!

1) **“suffer” (2:10):** It is sometimes God’s will to allow His people to suffer. Suffering is not inconsistent with God’s plan for our lives.

ESV **Romans 8:18** ... the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

2) **According to 2:10, who was the ultimate source of their coming jail time?** The devil was the true source, and obviously was directing the actions of his unwitting servants. Perspective:

ESV **Ephesians 6:12** ... we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

• **“devil” (2:10):** “Devil” is from *diabolos* (transliterated “diabolical”); *dia* means through (“diameter”) and *bolé* means to throw. Thus, it was to hurl false accusations at someone. Translated, it means to slander. Thus the devil was called:

ESV **Revelation 12:10** ... the accuser of our brothers ... who accuses them day and night before our God.

ESV **1 Peter 5:8b-10** Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.

How does the mention of prison in 2:10 show that the Roman government would play a role in their coming persecution? The Jews did not have the ability to imprison anyone. The role the slanderous Jews played was to make false accusations against the Christians to the Roman authorities. Similarly, the Jews in Palestine did not have the authority to kill Jesus, so they manipulated the Romans into doing it.

Example: A church was meeting in a barn in rural Social Circle, Georgia. Their liberal neighbors didn’t like it, so they told the authorities it was a cult that was sacrificing animals in their meetings. Upon investigation, the authorities discovered the accusation was false, but forced them out of the barn because it did not meet fire code requirements. Satanic mission accomplished.

History: For most of New Testament history, the persecution of the church came not from the Romans, but from the Jews. However, the Romans later increasingly played a role in persecution too, as predicted here and later in the book of Revelation.

Based on 2:10, what was one purpose of this suffering? One purpose was so that they would be “tested.”

In general, what is the purpose of a test? An object is tested to see if it works properly. Test equipment is used to electronics to see if a circuit works properly. A person is tested to see if he is competent or genuine. With Christianity, many people claim to love Jesus, but a test of their faith will often reveal that they really do not.

Example: Suppose you meet someone who claims to be a Christian, but you have your doubts, so you test him by asking: "Why should God let you into heaven?" If his answer has to do with being a good person, he failed the test!

ESV **James 1:12** Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life ...

What's the difference between a test and a temptation? A temptation is a solicitation to do evil. God does not tempt us, but he does allow us to be tested. Pay attention! There will be a test!

Example: A math test is amoral; it is designed to reveal your math skills. However, in the middle of the math test, you may be tempted to cheat by looking for a right answer on someone else's paper.

In 2:10, how long would this tribulation last? It would last ten days. Some understand it literally to mean they would only be in prison for ten days (as previously stated, criminals were not given long prison sentences). In the ancient world, criminals were not given long prison sentences. Prison was usually only temporary place of confinement where the accused awaited trial or punishment.⁷ The release after ten days may have been through martyrdom:

ESV **Revelation 6:9-10** ... I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"

If the ten days were *not* literal days, what might the number ten represent (2:10)? Some guess that it merely means a short time of persecution; the expression "ten days" is thought to be an idiom for a short time.⁸ Still others guess that ten represents completion, meaning that it would be intense or total tribulation.⁹

What outcome did Jesus promise if they remained faithful unto death (2:10b)? Jesus promised to give them the crown of life.

• **"crown" (2:10):** From *stephanos*, a laurel wreath bestowed on victors.

ESV **1 Corinthians 9:24-25** ... in a race all the runners compete.... They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.

⁷ Mounce, *Revelation*, 93.

⁸ Barclay, *Revelation*, 96.

⁹ Mounce, *Revelation*, 94.

Polycarp: Smyrna church leader Polycarp was martyred there c. A.D. 160. He is reported to have said this while on trial: "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me? ... You threaten me with the fire that burns for a time, and is quickly quenched, for you do not know the fire which awaits the wicked in the judgment to come and in everlasting punishment. Why are you waiting? Come, do what you will."¹⁰

2:11

What did Jesus promise to those who conquer (2:11)? He promised that he would not be hurt by the second death.

What is the second death (2:11)? Just like every person is born (physically), but only some are born again (spiritually), so too the first death is physical; the second death is spiritual. The second death is to be thrown into the Lake of Fire (Hell). If you are only born once (physically), then you will die twice (physically and spiritually). However, if you are born twice (physically and spiritually), then you will only die once (physically).

ESV **Revelation 21:8** ... as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.

So What?

How did Jesus make it clear in 2:11 that His words to Smyrna are also relevant to us also? Jesus appealed to anyone who has an ear to hear what the Spirit said to the churches (plural).

What can we take home with us based on Jesus message to the believers in Smyrna? We should realize **1)** that our faith will be tested, and **2)** that we may face suffering. However, no matter what the future brings, we must determine to be **3)** faithful unto death, **4)** without fear.

KJV **Job 13:15** Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him ...

ESV **Daniel 3:17-18** ... our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.

What criticism did Jesus have of the church in Smyrna (2:9-11)? What were they doing wrong? They came through the performance review unscathed!

Review: What are the most common ways to interpret the book of Revelation? The historicist, preterist, futurist, and idealist views are most common.

**** = Ask this question aloud before having someone read the text.

Note: These lessons are designed for a 45 minute teaching slot and are based on the ESV.

¹⁰ Barclay, *Revelation*, 93.

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