

GATEWAY CHURCH NORTHUMBERLAND

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To the Church in Smyrna – Joss Bray

We are looking at what Jesus had to say to seven churches in Asia in the book of Revelation. They were seven real churches that John knew and they were on an important trade route around Asia. Each one was addressed in the same order as a traveller would have come across them on the road. The letters were messages to the churches from the risen and glorious Lord Jesus who really wanted them to be good lampstands for the light of the gospel.

Last week it was the church at Ephesus. We saw that they were doing lots of good things and they believed all the right things and they persevered through difficulties. However, they had forsaken their first love. The passion and fire for God and for each other had subsided and although the church looked good on the outside, it had lost its heart.

Somewhere along the way, they changed their focus from what first brought them together and joined them together in their love for God and for fellow Christians. They changed from lovers first, to doers and thinkers first – and Jesus was not impressed – and even said words to the effect that he would close the church if they did not change.

The reason that we have these messages for the churches is so we can learn too and hopefully either rectify mistakes we are making and also avoid making them in the future.

So the questions from last week were “Are we motivated by God’s love first, am I loving God and seeking him and his kingdom first in my life, do I try to find out what he is saying to me through the bible, do I try and listen enough to the Holy Spirit and have I been captivated by the love of Jesus and his ascended, risen glory?”

The stakes are high for us and the church – these things are of vital importance.

So let’s look at the second message – this one is to the church in Smyrna.

Revelation 2 v 8-11

REV 2:8 "To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.⁹ I know your afflictions and your poverty--yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.¹⁰ Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.

REV 2:11 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.

Smyrna

Smyrna was a port city with a good harbour about thirty-five miles northwest of Ephesus. It is the modern day Izmir – now the third largest city in Turkey. It was prosperous then as well, and was a main rival to Ephesus in the region. We don't know how the church started in Smyrna - but it could well have been a result of one of Paul's missionary journeys – or people relocating and starting a church there.

Jesus introduces himself

REV 2:8These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again

Once again, we hear about Jesus right at the beginning – he who is First and Last, who died and came to life again. There could be no dispute as to who the message came from – Jesus summed himself up in this unique way. He began with his eternal credentials – he is the beginning and end of all things - remember all things were created through him and he wraps it all up and starts again with a new heaven and earth – which themselves stretch to eternity. History is His story.

But just to make sure his hearers remember that he came to earth and suffered and died he reminds them of this - and also that he rose again. This would be particularly important for the persecuted church. They do not love and trust in a God who is remote from their suffering – even to death. No one can say that Jesus “doesn't know what it is like...” – he does. But right there, they are also reminded that after death there is life again in Jesus.

Afflictions and poverty

So when he says:

REV 2:9 I know your afflictions and your poverty--yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

He does actually know what it is to be afflicted and to be poor and slandered – yet at the same time to be eternally rich with blessings and promises that far outweigh their present troubles. He himself has lived it. He is not a distant or theoretical teacher – he has been right in the midst of it. Often people will say of - for example – war or bereavement or even childbirth – that you can't really understand it unless you have been through it. I think that it is true in the sense that you cannot say to someone "I understand how you are feeling" unless you have lived it yourself.

There is therefore no doubt that Jesus could say with authority what he did to the church in Smyrna – it wasn't just platitudes.

So the city was prosperous but the Christians were poor and persecuted. This may have been because people refused to trade with them – something that hasn't happened in this country yet, but I am sure happens elsewhere in the world still. They may also have been persecuted because they wouldn't acknowledge Caesar as Lord. Again, it has not happened here yet, but it definitely does happen in other parts of the world where there are oppressive dictatorial regimes that oppress the church and deny God and set themselves up as the ultimate authority.

So what does the reference to "those who say they are Jews and are not" mean? Interestingly, Jesus refers to these slanderers as not being Jews. So the question is what sort of "not Jews" are they?

The first interpretation links with Paul's letter to the Romans:

RO 2:28 A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. ²⁹ No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code

So it could be that these "Jews" who met in the "synagogue of Satan" were Jews only outwardly but did not know God inwardly and slandered the Christians.

Another interpretation is that the “synagogue of Satan” consisted of Gentile Christians who had “Judaized,” that is they adopted Jewish ways or even converted to Judaism, perhaps in order to avoid persecution by the Romans.

Either way they opposed the Christians. Satan literally means “adversary” and “enemy” in Hebrew so this was strong stuff that was coming their way – they were being opposed by a powerful enemy.

So what were they rich in? Well – we will see later....

Now for some more bad news

First, there was some more bad news -

REV 2:10 Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days.

Not really what you want to hear as a church – but Jesus didn’t hold back from the truth. Being a Christian then - and now – is not a recipe for a trouble free, quiet and easy life. Look at what is happening in Iraq – Christians resisting to the point of death when they are being forced to convert to Islam. We have not yet had to stand up and resist to that extent – but it may happen. History tells us that things change – often in unforeseen ways – we need to be aware of this even if Iraq seems a long way from us. Even so – there is a challenge to stand with our brothers and sisters wherever they are – right now.

So the church in Smyrna will be tested by the devil – a name that means “accuser”. Note that God will allow this – as he did for Job in the Old Testament. Like gold refined in the fire and tested for purity – it comes out purer and better afterwards – even though the process is drastic. The church was not going to be spared that – although it would be for a limited time only. Testing is biblical and we shouldn’t be surprised when it happens to us.

In actual fact, a few years after this message, the church at Smyrna had a leader named Polycarp. He was martyred in Smyrna by being burnt at the stake. Note that the angel of the church was not there to protect him or the church from all harm. God allows

things to happen so that we will be refined and reflect his glory and love even more. We should not be afraid of this either.

Be faithful

REV 2:10 Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.

But be faithful instead! Like Polycarp who was faithful and countless others. There is something a lot better to come. Here is the promise – “I will give you the crown of life”. That is what the church was rich in – eternal life – and a glorious one at that. Their focus was eternity rather than the present afflictions. Their citizenship was in the heavenly kingdom. If that wasn't the case – then it was all pointless – and all this is pointless now.

Listen

REV 2:11 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.

So listen – the Spirit of God is talking to us. Although we will die and may suffer on this earth, we will then rise to eternal life – just as Jesus demonstrated. The second death is described later in Revelation 21 as “the fiery lake of burning sulphur” where all who are not saved will end up. Being saved means actually being saved from this eternal punishment. We have a lot to be thankful for!

Overcoming the enemy's plans, the accuser's testing, and being faithful to the end brings a great reward. Like the church at Smyrna, let's keep our eyes on eternity and by the grace of God overcome what is meant for evil in our lives. Let's live gratefully because of the salvation that God has promised us. In his mercy and love he demonstrated it by Jesus dying in our place and taking the punishment that should have been ours.

The crown of life is waiting!