

TITLE: #2: SMYRNA
SERIES: 7 Lessons from 7 Churches (2 of 7)
Text: Revelation 2:8-11

Balboa Community Church
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INTRO

Last week we began a new series: 7 Lessons from 7 Churches. We are looking at the 7 churches mentioned in Revelation Chapters 2 & 3. These were 7 actual churches located in Asia Minor during the era of the Roman Empire.

During the first few centuries after Christ, these 7 Roman controlled cities were also important in the spread of Christianity. Later, due to the spread of Islam, the Muslims took over this area now part of western Turkey.

These letters written to the 7 churches in Revelation 2 & 3 are the words of Jesus. And in them he shares His concern for each church and instructs them what action they need to take.

On the screen behind me you see a map of Eastern Turkey with the 7 churches of Revelation moving from left to right.

In your bulletin you will find an insert entitled: The Seven Churches of Revelation. Please keep this chart in your Bible as a handy reference tool.

Each church is listed with its Scripture reference. The second column records the commendation that Jesus gave the church. The third column His rebuke. And the last column the action that Jesus instructed them to take.

Last week Dan shared with us about the church in Ephesus. While they were hard workers and didn't tolerate evil, they had lost their first love. So Jesus instructed them to turn back or repent. To fall in love with Jesus all over again and restore their passion for following Him.

Today we look at the 2nd church: SMYRNA. I remember as a teenager traveling south from where we lived - and passing through a town called Smyrna, in Delaware. I always thought that was a strange name for a town. Later I discovered it was named in 1806 after the ancient Greek seaport of Smyrna in present-day Turkey.

The port city of Smyrna was about 35 miles up the coast from Ephesus. It had an excellent harbor and many considered it to be one of the most beautiful cities on the coast of the Aegean Sea.

Smyrna is the only one of the 7 cities mentioned in Revelation that is still in existence. Today it is known as Izmir. Izmir is the 3rd largest city in Turkey - after Istanbul and Ankara. It is also the 2nd largest city on the Aegean coast - after Athens, Greece.

To help us understand a little bit more about the church in Smyrna, I would like to show a video hosted by Joe Stowell. Joe was the president of Moody Bible Institute for 18 years and is now president of Cornerstone University. He is on the Board of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, has served as a pastor, and is an author of more than 20 books. He also works with RBC, which publishes the devotional booklet, Out Daily Bread. RBC also produces videos through Day of Discovery.

[VIDEO]

The church in Smyrna was a strong church that endured great persecution.

Let's look now at the letter of Jesus to the church in Smyrna. It's found in Revelation 2:8-11.

INTRODUCTION

Revelation 2:8 - Write this letter to the angel of the church in Smyrna. This is the message from the one who is the First and the Last, who was dead but is now alive. NLT

Smyrna, like Ephesus, was a proud and beautiful city. It had earned the right to be self-governing. It had a large library, stadium, and the largest public theater in Asia.

Perhaps even more important, the city had become a center for the cult of emperor worship. Smyrna received permission (over several other cities) to build a temple to the emperor Tiberius. Under the emperor Domitian, emperor worship was required for all Roman citizens. Those who refused could receive the death penalty.

Once a year, all citizens were required to burn incense on an altar to Caesar, after which they would receive a certificate proving that they had done their civil duty. The citizen had to say, while burning the incense, "Caesar is lord." Many Christians considered this act blasphemous and refused to do it.

It would be like Congress passing a law that required US citizens to go to city hall, light a candle, and declare that "the President is lord." And anyone who refused to do that could be severely punished.

In verse 8, Jesus opens the letter by describing Himself as "the One who is the First and the Last, who was dead but is now alive."

Although this church was almost dead due to persecution, Christ was reminding them that he was sovereign and eternal. No matter what they faced, Christ already knew about it. As the "First and the Last," nothing could take him by surprise.

Christ identified himself as the one who died and came back to life again. So even if believers have to suffer to the point of death, Christ, the one who "came to life again," would raise them to eternal life with him.

This description Christ gives of Himself is important to encourage the church in Smyrna.

COMMENDATION

Revelation 2:9 - I know about your suffering and your poverty—but you are rich! I know the blasphemy of those opposing you. They say they are Jews, but they are not, because their synagogue belongs to Satan. NLT

It was difficult to be a Christian in a city that demanded that you worship Caesar. Just imagine the ridicule, the slander, the punishment... being ostracized from society.

But in addition, Smyrna also had a large Jewish population that actively opposed the Christians. Christ identified them as those who claimed to be Jews but really weren't. They may have claimed to have descended from Abraham, but true Jews (God's people) are those who have accepted Jesus as Messiah and Savior.

Paul wrote to the Christians in Galatia, "Now that you belong to Christ, YOU are the true children of Abraham. You are his heirs, and now all the promises God gave to him belong to you" (Gal 3:29 NLT).

Because these Jews had rejected the Messiah, they were, in reality, no more than a synagogue of Satan (John 8:31-47). That means they were serving Satan's purposes, not God's, because they hated and persecuted the true people of God, the Christians.

So the church in this city struggled against two hostile forces: a Gentile population that was loyal to Rome and supported emperor worship... and a large Jewish population strongly opposed to Christianity. Persecution and suffering were inevitable in that kind of environment.

And Christians were also suffering from poverty - even in this wealthy city. Their poverty may have come from sanctions against them as part of the persecution they faced. Christians in Smyrna struggled to make ends meet... to put food on the table... to find adequate employment.

Persecution & poverty caused a great deal of suffering for the Christians in Smyrna. And Jesus says, "I know all about it. I'm aware of your hardships. But you are rich! You have heavenly riches that none of the other citizens of Smyrna have."

Jesus commended them for their suffering. (One of 2 churches that he did not rebuke)

INSTRUCTIONS

Revelation 2:10 - Don't be afraid of what you are about to suffer. The devil will throw some of you into prison to test you. You will suffer for ten days. But if you remain faithful even when facing death, I will give you the crown of life. NLT

Christ told the believers in Smyrna, who had already been facing persecution and suffering, that they shouldn't be afraid of what they were about to suffer. More was coming.

Satan was behind the persecution by the Romans and Jews. They were carrying out the wishes of Satan. He would test believer's faith and the church was challenged to remain faithful to Christ even when facing death. Believers need not fear death because it will only result in their receiving the crown of life.

The message to the Smyrna church was to remain faithful during their suffering because God is in control and because his promises are true. Jesus never taught that by being faithful to him, we would avoid trouble, suffering, and persecution.

Rather, we must be faithful to Christ even when suffering. Because only then will our faith prove genuine.

LIFE LESSONS

What can we learn from Christ's letter to the church in Smyrna? What principles can we apply to our lives today? What is Christ saying to the church at Balboa?

• Be Fearless

If we are living lives that honor God, we can expect suffering, persecution, and even poverty. It should not surprise us.

Now I'm not referring to suffering that comes our way because of our own bad judgment or poor choices. There will always be consequences for those.

But Christians should not be surprised when others make fun of us... or we don't get the promotion because of our faith... or when many Christians around the world are killed because they will not renounce Jesus.

But there is no need to be afraid. Jesus said in Revelation 2:10: "Don't be afraid of what you are about to suffer."

Because Christ is Lord over all of life's circumstances, we have nothing to fear.

Take encouragement from these words that Paul wrote to the church in Rome:

Romans 8:35-39 - ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ³⁶ As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. NIV

The second thing Christ tells us is to...

• Be Faithful

Revelation 2:10 - Be faithful, even to the point of death. NIV

Given the intensity of the persecution in Smyrna, I believe Christ was saying, "Yes, you may lose your life for My sake, but be faithful until the end."

Jesus is calling YOU to be faithful until the end. You may be tempted to compromise. You may want to opt out of the hardships. You may go soft on your faith so you don't create waves.

But Jesus is asking you to stand up and be counted for Him. He wants you to be faithful - even if it means losing your life. (If that's what it comes to...)

We have to be willing to live every day as if the only thing that matters is Christ. God wants us to be faithful to Him.

CONCLUSION

Jesus closes His letter to the church in Smyrna with this:

Revelation 2:11 - Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches. Whoever is victorious will not be harmed by the second death. NLT

Whoever stands strong for the faith despite persecution and suffering - will not be hurt by the second death.

Believers and unbelievers will all experience the FIRST death when they die physically. For some believers that might mean martyrdom.

But those who are faithful believers will not experience a SECOND death - which is eternal separation from God.

Instead, they will receive a crown of life.

Followers of Jesus: You can expect suffering... even poverty. But BE FEARLESS! Live life confidently for God and trust Him.

And BE FAITHFUL. No matter what life throws your way - stand firmly with Jesus... and in the end He will reward you!