



To the Church in Smyrna

Revelation 2:8-11

Although we've only just begun to read through these Letters to the Seven Churches, we've already noted the pattern which is played out in each one. The letters normally begin with a description of Jesus which echoes the language found in Chapter One, followed by words of approval for the ways in which the church is remaining faithful.

On most occasions, the positive opening to the letter gives way to words of warning about ways in which the churches fall short of who Jesus would have them be. But this is not the case with regard to Smyrna, one of only two letters (the other being to Philadelphia) where no words of condemnation can be found. Instead, we find only a message of assurance to a church facing persecution.

There is still a settlement today in the place where Smyrna was located, the modern Turkish city of Izmir. At the time in which Revelation was written Smyrna had a reputation for being particularly loyal to the Empire, having been the first city in Asia to build a temple dedicated to the goddess Roma. This was one reason why the church in the city experienced hardship, the other being 'a large Jewish population that virulently opposed Christians.'¹

One theory behind this persecution is that Jews drew attention to ways in which Christians were disloyal to Rome with the aim of attracting attention away from themselves. It's also possible that differing beliefs lay behind the Jewish antipathy (Christians were excommunicated from the Jewish synagogues of Smyrna in the 80s AD). The language used by Jesus to describe their actions is particularly vivid and it's helpful to note the perspective offered by the American New Testament scholar Ben Witherington: 'It seems likely that he means not that Satan was actually being worshipped in the synagogue but rather that their action in persecuting was "of the Devil."²

In the midst of this suffering, Jesus encourages the Church in Smyrna: 'Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer' (v10). He goes on to describe a period of suffering which will last for ten days. It seems likely that this number is not to be interpreted literally, but rather that it describes a time of hardship which is only temporary and which ultimately will come to an end (some commentators have made parallels to the similar time of testing endured by Daniel and his friends which is referred to in Daniel 1:12).

In the midst of this suffering the church is called to bear witness to Jesus in a way which follows his own example: 'Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give

¹ Grant Osborne, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Revelation*, 2002, 127

² Ben Witherington, *The New Cambridge Bible Commentary: Revelation*, 2003, 100

you life as your victor's crown' (v10). While they may face suffering and even death in the present world, they are, however, assured of a future victory, and protection from 'the final eternal "death" beyond the mere physical death that ends this life.'³

1. In what way might the opening description of Jesus which is found in this letter be especially meaningful to the church in Smyrna?
2. In verse 9 the Church in Smyrna finds its suffering described in ways which might surprise us. In spite of 'your afflictions and your poverty... you are rich!' Can you think of any sense in which persecution might be experienced as 'enriching' by a follower of Jesus?
3. As we've previously noted Revelation is a book which takes 'behind the scenes,' helping us understand more about how God is bringing about his purposes our world but also reminding us of others forces which are at work. How might the words of Jesus in verse 10 have changed the way Christians regarded those who were attacking them? As you think about this question, you might also want to reflect on Ephesians 6:12.
4. One of the ways Jesus seeks to encourage the Church in Smyrna is to encourage them to keep a long-term perspective, looking beyond the suffering of the present moment. In what ways can we encourage each other in SBC to have a view of things which looks beyond immediate problems and sees a bigger picture?

Instead of prolonged discussion, perhaps the most appropriate response we can make to this letter is to pray for our brothers and sisters who currently find themselves in the same situation as the Church in Smyrna, under attack because of their faith in Jesus. Along with this week's notes, you'll also find information from Release International on some of the most difficult countries to be a Christian in the world today. Can you take time to read of some this material, and pray in response to it?

³ Grant Osborne, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Revelation*, 2002, 136