

STUDY 2 - LETTER TO THE CHURCH IN SMYRNA (2:8-11)

As we come to the second of the seven church, it is obvious from just a cursory reading that this is the shortest and warmest letter. The Lord makes no criticisms of this church, just loving observations, encouragements, and promises.

Smyrna was a famous city (the birthplace of Homer, the writer not the Simpson), and was an important business centre. However it was very hard for Christians to live there. It was full of idols, and there was a large Jewish community who lived there.

As Jesus begins to speak to the church he reminds them of an important aspect of what he had already said to John (see 1:18). He is the "first and last" - the eternal Lord, pointing to the fact that reality is more than just the few years we have on this earth. He died and came to life - showing that death is not the end, and that he holds the keys to the grave. The significance for Smyrna of these particularly aspects of who he is becomes clear as we read on through the letter.

As in all the letters Jesus points out what he knows about this church. He knows that they are facing affliction at present, and he knows that they are poor (this is likely to be literally true, as Christians were often unable to find work as they were excluded from the guilds - ancient trade unions - for refusing to participate in idol worship). This was a church in a highly successful city that felt like they were at the bottom of society. More than that they were being persecuted particularly by the Jews, those who claimed to be God's people.

However, Jesus doesn't just point out facts, he also interprets their situation for them. Yes, they are poor - but in reality they are rich, as they know Him, the one who is alive and in Him they have every spiritual blessing that nothing can take away. Their persecutors are not true Jews - meaning they are not truly God's people, but they are doing Satan's will persecuting the church. As a leader it's probably worth pointing out that verse 9 is not an anti-semitic racist comment, the point is theological.

Jesus does not write to this church simply to make them feel good. Life is going to get worse in Smyrna. The persecution is going to be ratcheted up, as some of this church will go to prison, and some may even be martyred. Jesus says "do not fear". Why can he say this? The very fact he is telling this church about what is to come shows that these things are not out of his control. The

statement "for ten days" shows that this time of suffering is sovereignly limited. Jesus also promises that faithfulness in this time of trial is possible, and that there is a crown on offer that death cannot take away.

As we move on in the book of Revelation we see that although the devil hates the church and will do all he can to destroy it, he will not be successful. Revelation 12:11 says the church overcomes "by the blood of the lamb, the word of his testimony, and they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death". This is very challenging - it means that part of being a Christian is to recognise that death is not the most terrifying thing that can happen to us. The devil cannot win if we are not scared of death - and we have no need to be scared of death if Jesus Christ has died and come to life.

In verse 11 Jesus promises that those who hear and obey will conquer and not be hurt by the second death. There is a death beyond physical death that is far worse, a "death" (eternal, conscious punishment) we are told about in Rev 20. This shows why we do not fear death. We know that we are secure with Christ forever.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

(Please don't just ask these without thinking them through yourself! The order and wording of the questions may need to change)

What is your first impression of Jesus' letter to the church in Smyrna? How is the content different to the letter to the church in Ephesus?

What does Jesus know about the church in Smyrna? (Verse 9)

How does he interpret their experience for them? How should they view themselves? Who are their enemies working for? (Verse 9)

What does Jesus tell this church about their future? (Verse 10)

Is this suffering out of Jesus' control? What indications are there that it is not?

How can Jesus say "do not fear" about a future that sounds so terrifying? (Verse 10)

What particularly does Jesus draw attention to about himself as he begins this letter (verse 8)? Why is that such a comfort to the church in Smyrna?

What promise does Jesus give to the church in Smyrna? (verse 11) How does this put physical death in perspective for believers?

In Revelation 12 and 13 there are symbolic descriptions of the kinds of persecutions Christians will face as the devil seeks to destroy us. Why is it that the devil is not victorious? (see 12:11) Is that a challenge to us? What temptations are there not to think in that way?

If we have to face a difficult situation, or even persecution, for trusting Christ how can we not fear? What should we replace that fear with? How will knowing what our true riches are (verse 9) help us in this?