

SMYRNA

The Poor, But Rich Church

Rock Church Bible Study

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I. INTRODUCTION.

A. Why This Study?

1. We learn the conditions of some churches of Christ and how they were behaving in Asia Minor (Turkey) in the last part of the 1st century. The churches as a whole were spiritually unhealthy and needed to repent and return to Christ. These Christians also faced opposition from the Greeks, the Romans, unbelieving Jews, and Satan, of course.
2. NT Christians were being persecuted in the Roman Empire under the reign of Domitian (c. A.D. 95). In particular, citizens of the Empire were forced to engage in Emperor worship. They could obey civil laws in general (Rom. 13:1ff), but not this law (Acts 5:29). True Christians have just one Lord – Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 8:6; 12:3; Eph. 4:5).
3. John was imprisoned for the cause of Christ on the barren island of Patmos about 65-70 miles SW off the coast of Ephesus in the Aegean Sea (1:9). He wrote to the churches to encourage them to remain faithful.

B. Two Objectives:

1. Understand more about the 7 churches and letters as a whole.
2. Understand more about the church at Smyrna in particular.

II. THE SEVEN CHURCHES AND LETTERS.

- A. The Seven Churches Are Not All the Churches in This Area (see Troas, Colossae, and Hierapolis), So These Churches Become Representative of God's People Completely (note the number 7) or Universally, Then and Now (see 2:23b).
- B. There Are Some Spiritual Descriptions of Jesus and the Churches That Match the Physical Surroundings of the Cities (Local Allusions).
- C. All the Churches Are Commended and Condemned for Some Bad Behavior Except For Two (Smyrna and Philadelphia Are Not Condemned).
- D. The Bad Behavior Among the Five Churches Is a Result of Worldliness, Not Just Persecution (18:4).
- E. All the Letters Would Have Been Read to All the Churches (1:11; 2:7, 11; etc.).

- F. Some of the Information About Jesus in the Letters Is Mentioned First in Revelation 1 (see especially 1:12-20).
- G. The Letters Contain Information About What Is Going on in the Present, Not the Future as in the Rest of the Book (1:1, 19).
- H. All the Letters Follow a Distinct Pattern.
1. Internal structure:
 - a) Commission: “And to the angel of the church in...”
 - b) Character: “These things says he...”
 - c) Commendation: “I know your...”
 - d) Condemnation / Complaint: “I have ... against you...” (Smyrna and Philadelphia do not have a condemnation; Sardis and Laodicea are condemned but without the characteristic formula).
 - e) Command / Correction: “Repent therefore...” (except Smyrna and Philadelphia).
 - f) Counsel / Coming: “Do this...” or “Be this...” ... “I come...” (no “coming” in Smyrna).
 - g) Call: “He that has ears to hear let him hear...”
 - h) Challenge / Conquering: “He that overcomes...” (followed by a reward).
 2. External structure (possible chiasm):
 - A. Ephesus (unhealthy).
 - B. Smyrna (healthy).
 - C. Pergamum (unhealthy).
 - D. Thyatira (unhealthy).
 - C¹. Sardis (unhealthy).
 - B¹. Philadelphia (healthy).
 - A¹. Laodicea (unhealthy).
- I. There Are Four Phrases That Are Found in All the Letters: “To the angel...”, “I know your works...”, “he that has ears to hear...” and, “he that overcomes...”
- J. The Exhortation to Hear Comes Before the Promise in the First Three Letters and Follows After the Promise in the Last Four Letters.
- K. The Letters Are in A Section of the Book at the Beginning Showing That God and Jesus Are Ultimately in Control of All Things, Not Rome (Revelation 1-5).
- L. The Letters Show That God Judges His People Also – the Churches (Rev. 1-3), Not Just Rome (Rev.4-20), or All Mankind (Rev. 20-22).

M. There Appears to Be No Significance to the Order of the Letters, But One Traveling from Patmos Could Naturally Follow a Route from Ephesus to Laodicea Using the Order of the Letters.

III. THE CHURCH AT SMYRNA.

A. Smyrna – the City.

1. Geography.

- a) An Ionian city located in Western Asia minor about 35 miles north of Ephesus.
- b) A major port city.

2. History.

- a) Settled c. 1000 B.C. by Greeks in the harbor lowland at the base of Mt. Pagos (now called Kadifekale).
- b) It claimed to be the birthplace of Homer (Iliad and Odyssey), c. 850 B.C., with the Homerium built in his honor.
- c) The city went into decline in the 6th and 5th centuries B.C. because of its destruction by the Lydians of Sardis. Then, Smyrna was rebuilt by the Seleucids (one of Alexander the Great's generals), c. 334 B.C.
- d) It was a major port city during the Roman period (c. 65 B.C.) with about 100,000 residents. It was known as the crown of Iona and the "glory of Asia" (*agalma tes Asias*). It flourished in trade, commerce, and the arts.
- e) A very wealthy city because of the trade from the shipping, but the brethren were poor. It was also known for its beauty (the Golden Street, theater, stadium, library), its political importance (a free city), its Emperor worship, and its large Jewish population.
- f) Temples to Roman Emperor worship were located in the city. A temple to *Dea Roma* ("Rome the goddess") was built there as early as 195 B.C. In exchange for the *pax Romana* (Roman peace), the people were to worship *Dea Roma*. A temple to Tiberius was built there in A.D. 25. Coins, dedications, and statues depicting Roman Emperors (including Domitian, A.D. 81-96) have been found there. Emperor worship (offering a pinch of incense to Caesar once a year) was not a show of religious orthodoxy per se, but a show of political loyalty.
- g) The remains of the ancient city consist of part of the agora (marketplace) that runs about 394 ft. x 262 ft.
- h) Polycarp, a disciple of the apostle John and bishop of the church in Smyrna was put to death in Smyrna. He was burnt at the stake along with other Christians in the city's stadium, February 23, A.D. 155. Jews were a part of the group that put him to death on a Sabbath day before the Roman proconsul Quadratus. The proconsul said to

Polycarp: “Swear [to Caesar, CHR], and I will set thee at liberty; reproach Christ.” He was reported to have said: “Eighty and six years have I served him and he has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who has saved me?”

- i) More Christians died in Smyrna during the persecutions of Emperor Decius (A.D. 250).
- j) Today, Smyrna (meaning “myrrh”) is the modern city of Izmir and is Turkey’s 3rd largest city and the 2nd largest sea port with a population of about 3,482,447 citizens.

B. Smyrna - the Church.

1. Revelation 2:8-11 (the shortest of the 7 letters).
2. There is no record in the book of Acts of the beginning of this church, but it may have been founded during Paul’s 3rd preaching trip from Antioch (A.D. 53-56). See Acts 19:10.
3. “And to the angel” - The angel (Gr. ἀγγέλω, messenger) here is: (1) a supernatural being – like a guardian angel; (2) a human messenger delivering the letter; or (3) the attitude of the brethren in the church (1:16, 20; comp. 1:1; 22:6, 8, 16).
 - a) “of the church” - The church is called out of the world (Gr. ἐκκλησίας).
 - (1) “in Smyrna write” – For its history, see above.
4. “These things saith” – Jesus is speaking through John (1:1, 10).
 - a) “the first and the last” – This is a reference to Jesus’ eternal nature of deity (Jn. 1:1-3, 15; 8:58) just like God the Father (Isa. 41:4; 44:6; 48:12; Rev. 1:8, 11, 17; 22:13).
5. “Who was (lit. became) dead, and lived *again*” – Jesus has sovereign rule and control over all things, even his death and resurrection; he conquered death (1:5, 18; 4:9-10; 5:14; 7:2; 10:6; 20:4-5). This would give comfort and hope to the Christians in Smyrna who were persecuted and martyred for the cause of Christ. Additionally, Jesus may have said this as a local allusion to their own history of death (the city destroyed by the Lydians) and rebirth (the city rebuilt by the Greeks), or the annual reenactment of the death and resurrection of Dionysus, the god of wine.
6. “I know” – Jesus knows all about the local churches. Nothing escapes his notice. He is in their midst and holds them in his right hand; he is in control (1:13; 2:1). He truly is the “chief shepherd” (1 Pet. 5:4). Jesus also knows from personal experience about tribulation, poverty, blasphemy, suffering, and death from the hands of his persecutors.
 - a) “thy tribulation” – (Gr. θλίψιν, crushing or pressing trials); extreme pressure from the outside just like John experienced (1:9; 2:22; 7:14).

7. “and thy poverty (but thou art rich)” – They were both physically poor (Gr. *πτωχείαν*, destitute, extreme poverty, begging; see 2 Cor. 8:2, 9; not Gr. *penia*, having few possessions) and spiritually rich (Mt. 6:19-20; 2 Cor. 6:10; Jas. 2:5). See 3:17; 6:15; and 13:16. They often lived lives as poor outcasts. They were the opposite of Laodicea: the rich, but poor church.
- a) “and the blasphemy” – Gr. *βλασφημίαν*, slander or railing. Many Jews resented Christians and would blaspheme (verbal slander, reviling, misrepresentation, denunciation) them and report them to Greek and Roman authorities just like Rome itself would do (13:1, 5-6; 17:3). Christians were ridiculed for worshipping God and Jesus, but refusing the Roman Emperor worship.
- (1) “of them that say they are Jews” – Opposition to Christianity came from professed (claiming) Jews as well as Greeks and Romans.
- (a) “and they are not” – Either they were not acting like a typical godly Jew (they were worldly), or they were not believing in Jesus Christ and opposed to Christianity. Probably the latter.
- (b) “but are a synagogue of Satan” – These Jews were doing Satan’s will (Jn. 8:44) to persecute Christians. Note Satan’s influence at this time (2:13, 24; 3:9; 12:9; 20:2, 7). Judaism was sanctioned by Rome and some Jews would even worship the Emperor to avoid persecution. Note that a “synagogue of Satan” was also in Philadelphia, the other church without any condemnation (3:9).
8. “Fear not” – A command. Just like Jesus said in 1:17 (see Mt. 10:28, 31; 1 Pet. 3:14).
- a) “the things which thou art about to suffer” – The reference to suffering is used only here in Revelation.
9. “Behold, the devil” – Satan means “adversary” and devil means “accuser or slanderer” (12:9, 12; 20:2, 10).
- a) “is about to cast some of you into prison” – NT Christians were actually imprisoned for their faith just like the saints of the OT (Heb. 11:36) and for refusing to worship the Emperor.
- b) “that ye may be tried” – Gr. *πειρασθήτε*, testing or trial (2:2; 3:10). What God uses in a positive way to test his people (trial), the devil uses in a negative way to tempt them.
- c) “and ye shall have tribulation” – Crushing or pressing trials, extreme pressure. See above on verse 9.
- (1) “ten days” – Ten is symbolic of a full, but limited period of time for testing (see the ten days and testing in Dan. 1:12-15).
10. “Be thou faithful” – Gr. *πιστός*, a command to be trustworthy or trustful (committed) to Christ, not to Rome (2:13; 3:14; 17:14; 19:11; 21:5-6).

- a) “unto death” – These Christians were to be faithful to Christ “unto” (Gr. ἄχρι, as far as, up to) death, or even “to the point of death” (NIV, CSB, NET); that is, to the point of dying for Christ (see 12:11) - not simply faithful into your old age (2:13; 6:9; 14:12-13; 17:14; 20:5, 12-13). Christians today who cannot handle a little discomfort, inconvenience, inclement weather, etc., will never be willing to die for Christ. Jesus gave his all (death) and he expects us to give our all (death).
11. “and I will give thee” – Both salvation and heaven are gifts from Jesus, not Rome. He is the great giver of promises and blessings.
- a) “the crown” - The crown is the victor’s crown (Gr. στέφανον, the “victor’s crown” [NIV]; “prize of victory”, GNB; see 12:1; 14:14), not the diadema, the royal crown. Note the names Stephen and Stephanie.
- (1) “of life” – The victor’s crown consists of eternal life in heaven (2:7; 3:5, 11; 7:17; 11:11; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:6, 27; 22:1-2, 14, 17, 19). Jesus may have had in mind the acropolis on Mt. Pagos that looked like a crown. Just as Jesus died and lived again, so some of the Christians would be put to death for Christ and would live again. The Lord did not promise to remove their difficulties, but he did promise to reward their faithfulness.
12. “He that hath an ear, let him hear” – A Christian must hear, understand, take heed, and obey (Jer. 25:4; Mt. 11:15; Mk. 4:9, 23; Lk. 8:8; 14:35; Rev. 13:9).
- a) “what the Spirit says” – This is a Spirit-inspired message.
- (1) “to the churches” – Each church is to hear what is said to all the churches.
13. “He that overcometh” – A Christian has to have the kind of faith that will overcome (Gr. νικῶν, be victorious over, conquer; note the Nike brand) all that would oppose and attack them. Jesus overcame (Jn. 16:33) and he expects his followers to do the same (Rom. 12:21; 1 Jn. 2:13-14; 4:4; 5:4-5; 21:7; Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 5:5; 6:2; 11:7; 12:11; 13:7; 15:2; 17:14; 21:7).
14. “Shall not be hurt” – Hurt (punishment) awaits the unbelieving and unfaithful. The double negative adverb, “no, not”, is in the original Greek and strengthens the promise.
- a) “of the second death” – This is the eternal separation (death) of torment in the lake of fire, or hell (20:6, 14; 21:8). These faithful Christians may die physically, but they will not die the second death.

IV. CONCLUSION: SMYRNA TEACHES US ABOUT TRUE RICHES, TRUE COMMITMENT, AND TRUE LIVING.