

REVELATION

Seeing, Knowing and Serving Jesus Christ
Today at the Edge of History

Chapter 2:8-11, 3:7-13

Texts: Revelation 2:8-11, 3:7-13 - Smyrna & Philadelphia

To the Church in Smyrna

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.

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.



Ruins of Smyrna

To the Church in Philadelphia

⁷ "To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:

These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. ⁸ I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. ⁹ I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. ¹⁰ Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth.

¹¹ I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. ¹² Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name. ¹³ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Two Churches On the Edge

An intriguing reality concerning the letters to the churches at Smyrna and at Philadelphia is that there is a section missing. All the other letters include a list of things Jesus has against that church and a warning to straighten up. There is no such word of admonition to these two. Instead there is just an encouragement to keep going like they are going. Why? Because they are going well. Certainly these are not perfect churches, but they are as close as it gets in Asia at the close of the first century (and probably anywhere else at any other time in history). Their faith is

strong. They are not swerving away from the truth and love of Jesus "Christ. They are enduring hardship rather than denying Christ's Lordship. They are an effective instrument in God's hands for the in-breaking of His Kingdom. They are sharp churches.

And what is the result of their costly faithfulness? The Lord is pleased, but their unbelieving neighbors are not. People who are buying into the religion of the empire and reaping its rewards, and those who adhere to other religious systems (like the militant "false Jews" mentioned), are persecuting them. They

are making things tough on them, probably socially, economically and otherwise.

The word "persecution" (*thlypsis* in Greek) means, literally, "pressure." As the Kingdom of God breaks into the world, it creates pressure. Christians live at the edge of this in-breaking in every moment in history. And the sharper the church, the more it will feel the world's counter-pressure. And the sharper the church, the more it will feel the world's counter-pressure. And the more the Lord's word to them will be nothing but "Keep going! I am with you!"

Read & Reflect - 2:8-11, 3:7-13

First Reading/First Impression: Imagine you are writing a quick postcard to a friend in the Smyrna or Philadelphia church. How might you finish this thought: *Weather's beautiful, wish you were...*

*A church cannot be a true church without causing trouble.”
- Thomas Torrance*

Second Reading/Main Thought: What is the main thing Jesus seems to be saying to these two churches?

Search

Verses 2:8-11, 3:7-13 - Fill in the chart below from the contents of the Smyrna & Philadelphia Letters.

Church	How Jesus Presents Himself	What Jesus Knows	What Jesus Has Against Them	What Jesus Calls Them To Do	Warnings	Blessings
<i>Smyrna</i>			-----			
<i>Phil-adelphia</i>			-----			

1. What does Jesus, through John, say are the Smyrna & Philadelphia churches' commendable assets?

Smyrna:	Philadelphia:
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2. Why do you suppose Jesus has no word of criticism - "I have this against you." - for these churches?
What liabilities *do* they have?

3. What is causing these churches' afflictions and suffering and pressure?

4. What does Jesus say He is going to do about the situation? What does He urge them to do? Why?

Apply - 2:8-11, 3:7-13

1. What are some pressures you are feeling today?

2. Remembering that we live "at the edte of history... at the point of the in-breaking of God's Kingdom into and against the kingdoms of this world," which of these pressures are because of your resistance to God's Kingdom (God's rule over you) and which are because of your participation in God's Kingdom and resistance to the ways of the world?

3. What one phrase from these letters speaks most clearly to you about your life and your pressures today?

4. Pray to God and ask for His help with these things, for you and for your church.

John sees that the nature of Roman power is such that, if Christians are faithful witnesses to God, then they must suffer the inevitable clash between Rome's divine pretensions and their witness to the true God..."
- Richard Bauckham, The Theology of Revelation, p.38



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Smyrna... Located about 40 miles north of its rival city, Ephesus, Smyrna was a self-consciously Roman city striving to be, as its coins proclaimed, the "First City in Asia in Size and Beauty" (see below). It was first to build a temple, in 193 B.C., to the goddess *Roma*, and in 26 A.D. Emperor Tiberius chose it over 10 other applicant communities to build a temple for him. Not surprisingly, then, Smyrna was a community deeply enamored by its own Roman identity. Its history included several "resurrections"--times when the city was destroyed and then rebuilt better than before. In the next century Smyrna would become an important Christian center and the home church of Bishop Polycarp, an influential Christian leader and martyr. Today the city is called Izmir and is the third largest in Turkey. Here are some of Smyrna's self-affirmed assets:

- Associated with important literary figures including Homer
- Renowned for its beautiful buildings (it was called "The Crown of Asia"), fine wine, wealth and loyalty to the culture and control of Rome
- A center for science for medicine (one of its chief temples was in honor of Asclepius, the god of healing, whose serpent symbol is still associated with the practice of medicine)

v.2:8 - "**First and Last**"... this word from the previous chapter's vision is selected perhaps to assure the church that it is Jesus, and not Rome or their hostile neighbors, who will get the last word about them... "**died and came to life again**"... a phrase about Jesus that also had a "Smyrnian angle" because of the city's proud history of destruction and rebirth.

v.9 - "**affliction**"... the same word as in 1:9 when John calls himself their companion in "suffering:... then in 2:10 it will be translated "persecution"... Literally, the word "*thlypsis*" in Greek) means "pressure" (see p.1).

"**poverty**"... their refusal to go along with emperor worship ceremonies probably made it difficult for Christians to make a living... "**synagogue of Satan**"... for certain historical and superstitious reasons

Jews were exempt from many of the mandated forms of emperor worship. Christians, many of whom had been practicing Jews, were seen as dangerous agitators putting their privilege in jeopardy as well as corrupting their faith. Slanderous persecution was the response of some hard-liners whom John calls "**those who say they are Jews and are not.**"



Pillar Ruins of Philadelphia

v.10 - "**ten days**"... means a relatively short amount of time and indicates that ultimately Jesus is still in control of things... "**Be faithful even to the point of death**"... Jesus' exhortation here raises the question "Why doesn't he take away the pressure? Why does he let them die?"... Darrell Johnson offers an answer: "*Because in the nature of things that's not possible... The more faithful we are to Jesus Christ, the greater the pressure*" (Discipleship on the Edge, p.67, 68)... "**crown**"... a garland (a different word would be used for a royal crown) that would be worn in honor by an emperor entering a city or a victorious athlete...

v.11 - "**second death**"... final spiritual death which involves eternal separation from the Living God who is the source of life.

Philadelphia... The youngest of the seven cities, Philadelphia (which means "one who loves his brother") was a place very much like Smyrna for the Christians there. It was founded in 140 B.C. as a base for spreading Hellenistic culture at the base of an active volcano. This meant rich soil but also many and large earthquakes. The city was demolished by one in A.D. 17 and then was rebuilt with the help of an imperial subsidy. In gratitude the city changed its name to "*Philadelphia Neocaesarea*" (new city of Caesar). Because of the constant threat of destruction and frequent tremors, citizens constantly were leaving and then coming back in a "frightened rhythm of flight and return" (William Barclay, The Seven Churches, p.97).

v.3, 7 - "**key of David**"... refers to Isaiah 20:22 and the "key to the house of David" which indicates access to the riches of God's temple... Jesus seems to be referring to his authority to admit or bar people from His kingdom (where the real temple and the real riches are found!)...

v.8 - "**See**"... this is a command, a repeated thematic command in Revelation... "Look! Look at me!"... "**open door**"... certainly the door to salvation and eternal life, but probably also the door of opportunity for mission work, for spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ. This relates to the city's founding purpose (see above) as a "missionary city" for Hellenism...

v.12 - "**pillar**"... could be a support for a roof or a freestanding monument... "**never again will he leave it**"... unlike pillars in quake-prone Philadelphia, this one doesn't move!... Unlike citizens of frightening Philadelphia people in God's temple don't come and go: They stay!... "**new Jerusalem... new name**"... Jesus alludes here both to the history of the city, rebuilt and renamed, and the future of His people (see Revelation 21-22)...