

Followers of the Way

Smyrna: The crown of life – wealth beyond our wildest dreams

Philip Quenby, 8-10-23

Revelation 2:8-11, Revelation 22:12-17

This is the second in our sermon series on the letters to the seven churches in Revelation. These are actual congregations in the first century AD, each facing pressures particular to their time and place, whom Jesus addresses directly through the apostle John. But they are also types of the Church down the ages, and their triumphs and disasters have a universal aspect. These letters still speak to us today, whether as individual fellowships, or collectively as the Body of Christ – and we need to pay very close attention to what the Lord has to say to us through them.

The letter we will be concentrating on in this talk is to the church in Smyrna. Now known as Izmir in modern Turkey, this city lies on the Aegean coast, and was still an important commercial centre right into the early decades of the twentieth century. It was a Greek city, and though it was conquered by the Ottoman Turks in 1424, it continued to have a significant Greek flavour until Greeks were driven out in the aftermath of the First World War. Nowadays there is little but ruins left of the church John knew. That is the painful reality we must get hold of right at the start: any church is only ever a single generation away from extinction. Faith cannot be inherited. It does not pass automatically down blood lines. It does not matter how glorious our heritage might be, or what has been done in years past. The continuation of a Christian community depends on the faithful preaching of the Gospel by the present generation, and a heart to receive the good news on the part of generations to come. In modern-day Britain, these facts should cause us to tremble, to seek God's face in confession and repentance on behalf of our land, and to war in the Spirit to retake ground the enemy has seized. Because the simple and unvarnished truth is: if we do not do those things, no-one else will. We cannot outsource our duty, or get someone else to fulfil our obligations. It is long past time for us to start conducting ourselves as the soldiers of Christ (2 Timothy 2:3) we are supposed to be.

That is the bad news. But this letter has good news, too. It does not only give us hope, but God's plan for how to deal with our dire situation and the things that oppress us. And it makes the most wonderful promise: of the crown of life – which is to say, riches beyond our wildest dreams. Truly, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him." (1 Corinthians 2:9, quoting Isaiah 64:4).

What Jesus speaks to the Smyrna church is brief – only 130 words of English in the NIV’s rendition of the original Greek. But in this short text, He addresses Creation and End Times; spiritual riches, the impermanence of earthly things, and the value system of the kingdom of heaven; Satan’s counterfeits, and God’s realities; knowing the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings in persecution and hardship; spiritual warfare, and coming through victorious. God is never one to waste breath! The Bible has not a single word too many or too few. Each word and every phrase are in exactly the order and place they are supposed to be. This book says what it means, and means what it says. So, we should give its words their ordinary and natural meaning unless there are good reasons to do otherwise (for example, where poetic language is used).

Against that backdrop, let us examine these components of this letter.

Following the letter-writing conventions of the day, each of the seven letters to the churches starts by identifying the author. The first five words are the same in all seven cases: “These are the words of.” But after that, Jesus uses a different way to describe Himself on every occasion. It is a reminder that God deals with us according to our individual characters and circumstances. He knows us so intimately that “even the very hairs of [our] head are numbered” (Matthew 10:13, see also Luke 12:7), He cares for us deeply, and He understands precisely what we are going through. So, these letters give the embattled congregations exactly the touch from God they need at this point in their walk with Him. To **Ephesus**, He is Lord of the Church – the one “who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands” (Revelation 2:1). To **Pergamum**, He is a warrior God, the LORD of Hosts – the one “who has the sharp, double-edged sword.” (Revelation 2:12). To **Thyatira**, He is the God of holiness, righteousness, and justice – the one “whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze.” (Revelation 2:18). To **Sardis**, He is the God who weighs the deeds of men and will judge – the one “who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.” (Revelation 3:1). To **Philadelphia**, He is the God who is utterly reliable, the messianic King who will fulfil all prophecy – the one “who is holy and true, who holds the key of David.” (Revelation 3:7). To **Laodicea**, He is the Absolute, the eternal standard against which all is to be measured – “the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation.” (Revelation 3:14).

Creation and End Times

And to Smyrna He describes Himself as something else again. When Jesus calls Himself “the First and the Last, who died and came to life again” (Revelation 2:8), He essentially repeats what He said to the apostle John as he appeared to him in a vision during his exile on the island of Patmos: “I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! I hold the keys of death and Hades.” (Revelation 1:17-18). This same theme is picked up at the end of John’s vision, where Jesus says, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End. Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may go through the gates into the [heavenly] city.” (Revelation 22:13).

These are profound statements about Christ as God incarnate, about His lordship over life and death, and His speaking Creation into being. They take us back to the first sentence of the Bible. Alpha and Omega (the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet) are the equivalents of the Hebrew Aleph and Tav, which form the middle (fourth) word of the seven opening words of Genesis: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” (Genesis 1:1) = *bereshith bara Elohim ‘t hashamayim v’t haaretz*. So, Jesus (the Alpha and Omega, the Aleph and Tav) is right at the centre of the very first sentence of Scripture. This Aleph Tav appears 7,000 times in the Old Testament untranslated into English – Jesus is God’s watermark through the entire Tanakh (Hebrew Bible). This is the Jesus who speaks to His followers in Smyrna to say, “Do not be afraid” (Revelation 2:10).

Believers in Smyrna, already suffering “afflictions and ... poverty” (Revelation 2:9), and on the receiving end of slander (Revelation 2:9), are “about to suffer ... prison ... persecution ... and death” (Revelation 2:10). Here they receive assurance from the Creator of the universe and the One who stands above and beyond time that He holds all things in His hands, that He was there at the beginning of Creation and will be there at the end of the age, and He will see them through. With this as His starting point, the Lord goes on to remind His faithful ones to keep their eyes on the prize.

Lesson 1: make sure we keep our eyes on the prize, too.

Spiritual riches

After introducing Himself and assuring them He knows their situation, Jesus goes on to remind these believers that the values of the kingdom of heaven are not the values of this world. In fact, in most cases, they are diametrically opposite. Pagan society saw these early Christians languishing in material “poverty – yet [Jesus says] you are rich!” (Revelation 2:9). The Bible does not teach a prosperity gospel, but makes a very clear distinction between man’s idea of what constitutes true wealth, and how God sees things. Of earthly wealth, the Bible says, “Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone” (Proverbs 23:5), “for riches do not endure forever, and a crown is not secure for all generations.” (Proverbs 27:24). By contrast, Jesus says to His followers, “Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.” (Revelation 2:10). What Jesus offers is not something that will wither away or be gone in an instant, but spiritual riches that are eternal. As Solomon put it, “Whoever trusts in his [earthly] riches will fall, but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf” (Proverbs 11:28) and in God (personified by Wisdom) “are riches and honour, enduring wealth and prosperity.” (Proverbs 8:18).

Through the prophet Isaiah, God says, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.’” (Isaiah 55:8-9). God’s “eyes are on all [our] ways” (Jeremiah 16:17), He calls us to “walk in all the ways I have commanded you” (Jeremiah 7:23), and He promises to teach us His ways (Isaiah 2:3, Micah 4:2). Understanding the difference between the world’s idea of wealth and the things God says are of true value is a key part of learning about God’s ways. It

requires us to adopt a totally different focus from the culture around us. If we doubt how to go about this, a good place to start is to pray like King David, "Show me your ways, O LORD, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Saviour, and my hope is in you all day long." (Psalm 25:4).

Lesson 2: make sure we spend time studying the ways of the LORD, and walking accordingly.

Satan's counterfeits, God's realities

Walking in the LORD's ways requires being able to distinguish between God's realities, and Satan's counterfeits.

The devil specialises in anything underhand. Whenever and wherever possible, he will use thievery, trickery, and manipulation to get his way. He likes to keep out of sight wherever he can. Things done in secret and whispered in dark corners indicate he is likely to be at work. And since people would straightaway reject anything obviously evil, he likes to mix truth and falsehood, good and bad. As the 19th century preacher C. H. Spurgeon said, discernment is not about telling right from wrong, but right from almost right. Paul put it like this: "Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness." (2 Corinthians 11:14-15). Satan cannot create, but he is a well-practised counterfeiter. So, wherever God has His work and His people, Satan tries to bring in his own counterfeits, and in Smyrna one way he did this was through what Jesus calls "a synagogue of Satan." (Revelation 2:9).

Synagogues of Satan come in all shapes and sizes. They do not have to be literal synagogues and they do not have to be of a Jewish or even an openly religious flavour. Any group that allows itself to be a front for the work of the evil one can be a synagogue of Satan. Big or small; local or national; religious or secular: he can work through them all, and he is delighted if we fail to see him pulling the strings from behind the scenes.

True to type, this synagogue of Satan indulged in slander – the malicious spreading of lies and telling of tales. The best antidote to falsehood, of course, is truth, and the surest way to dispel darkness is to turn on a light. Sometimes merely stating truth and shining the light of Jesus is all the prayer warfare we need. On other occasions, though, we may need to go further. And here it is vital to recognise that God will not do what He has given His people power and authority to do. When the Israelites fleeing Egypt were trapped between the Red Sea and Pharaoh's pursuing chariots, God admonished Moses, "Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on. Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground." (Exodus 14:15). More on prayer warfare in a moment.

Lesson 3: "Test everything. Hold onto the good." (1 Thessalonians 5:21), and watch out for things that mix truth and falsehood, good and bad. "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough" (Galatians 5:9), and God hates mixture.

The fellowship of Christ's sufferings

Jesus warns the Smyrna church, "the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days." (Revelation 2:10). This might strike us as curious, since usually it is the devil who tempts, and God who tests. Presumably, God allowed this persecution as a means of testing and refining His church.

The number ten represents wholeness, law, discipline, and divine order. And this number reminds us of another time when God's people had to withstand persecution. At the start of their captivity, Daniel said to the guard put over him and his friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego by the Babylonians, "test your servants for ten days" (Daniel 1:12, see also Daniel 1:14, 1:15). At the end of this period of testing, they were questioned by Nebuchadnezzar, who "found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom." (Daniel 1:20). As a result, these four Israelites were promoted to high positions in the Babylonian state, and stood in godly power and authority in the face of the demonic strongholds in that kingdom. Ten days of persecution for the Smyrna church point us back to Daniel, but they also indicate that this is a prophetic foreshadowing of what is to come in the End Times. Given the days in which we live, this should seriously get our attention.

Being tested is seldom pleasant, and nobody in their right mind would deliberately seek out suffering for the sake of it. What follows is in no way intended to glorify suffering, or to suggest that it is God's will for your life, or to belittle what you may be going through. But the fact is that suffering has great power. We are all too familiar with its negative side: the capacity to maim and mar, to twist, frustrate, dampen, snatch away, pervert, deny, and cause pain. We reflect less often on its positive aspect: its impetus to self-sacrifice and courage, its ability to force reflection and bring growth, the example that can be given in it and the achievements that are possible through it. Both the greatest example in the face of suffering and the greatest achievement through it belong to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. This is why Paul says: "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead." (Philippians 3:10-11).

This is not the expression of a death wish or evidence of suicidal tendencies. It simply recognises that "the power of [Christ's] resurrection" (Philippians 3:10) was only possible because of the death that preceded it. We see this power replicated in humanity and in nature, hence Jesus saying, "I tell you the truth, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." (John 12:24). When we hear of the faith and fortitude of brothers and sisters undergoing persecution overseas, we marvel at their courage. But we also recognise they have a power we largely lack, precisely because of what it is they faithfully endure.

Lesson 4: if persecution and suffering come, seek the power to be gained through them.

Coming through victorious

God never sets us up to fail. His intention is for us to be “overcomers” (Revelation 2:11), just like our Master: Jesus said, “take heart! I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33). The apostle John – the man who Jesus entrusted with conveying His words to the seven churches – writes to people like us when he says, “you have overcome the evil one” (1 John 2:13, 2:14). Speaking of evil spirits, false prophets, and even the spirit of antichrist, he proclaims, “you have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.” (1 John 4:4). He goes on to declare, “everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.” (1 John 5:4-5). Jesus said, “the gates of Hades will not overcome [His Church].” (Matthew 16:18). Satan and his servants are not the overcomers – we are, by the grace of God! “They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings – and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers.” (Revelation 17:14).

There is a personal aspect to overcoming, as we grapple with the trials and tribulations of everyday life, and with temptations. As God said to Cain, “if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.” (Genesis 4:7). But there is a collective aspect to overcoming, too. We must contend for Church and nation as the Body of Christ and the army of God, using our weapons of heavenly warfare to turn back the advance of the enemy. In his vision, John saw the ultimate defeat of the enemy and “heard a loud voice in heaven say ... They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.” (Revelation 12:11). God is raising His standard in this nation and blowing a trumpet in Zion. We are being called to the colours for the fight of our life. Now is no time to hang back

To overcome is to defeat, conquer, vanquish, or overpower. And “in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” (Romans 8:37). Hallelujah!!

Lesson 5: let us start to act like conquerors instead of victims, and take the fight to the enemy.

Conclusion

Keep our eyes on the prize. Study the ways of the LORD, and walk accordingly. Test everything, being on the alert for mixture. Use suffering and persecution for growth. Wield our authority in Christ to war for the kingdom.

“The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ And let him who hears say, ‘Come!’ Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life.” (Revelation 22:17).

In these days of war and crisis, Jesus is calling forth His bride, and wanting His true Church to stand in the gap to contend for His purposes for Israel and the nations. “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” (Revelation 2:11). Amen

