

June 10th 2012: Letter to Smyrna: Rev 2:1-7 “No Place For Nominal Christians!”

This morning we turn our attention to Rev 2:8-11, the letter written to the church at Smyrna—the shortest of the seven letters, and one of only two that contain no rebuke for the believers in that place.

Today the ancient city of Smyrna still exists, contained within the modern city of Izmer, which is Turkey’s second largest city and a flourishing harbor town. In the following pictures you can see the two co-existing together.

Situated some 60 kilometres North of Ephesus, Smyrna was a city renowned for the natural beauty of its position and the skill with which the city planners had built the town. Because of the layout of its broad streets and the design of the city with its beautiful towers and buildings symmetrically placed, it appeared as a crown and was given the name Crown of Smyrna.

Within Smyrna, like most of the cities in that day, there was a strong emphasis on pagan worship with Temples to several gods, but especially there was in Smyrna a Temple to the Emperor Tiberius. Eleven other cities had sought that honour but Smyrna had been chosen and consequently became the centre for Emperor worship in that district.

This one fact affected the lives of all its citizens. Such a strong connection with Rome brought peace and prosperity to this trading centre, but it brought hardship and persecution to any who refused to acknowledge Caesar as their Lord.

By 81 A.D emperor worship had become compulsory for every person on threat of death. So once each year every person would be made to burn incense to the godhead of Caesar, say out loud, "*Caesar is Lord,*" and then receive a certificate of compliance.

One of the charges against the Christians was their disloyalty to Rome because they considered Jesus as Lord, not Caesar. And so, over time, the Christians were persecuted more and more; their property was confiscated, their goods were spoiled, their homes and businesses were looted, their ability to work in such a hostile environment and make a living for their families was diminished. Consequently there were many groups of believers living in poverty compared to the wealth of everyone else. That’s how it was for the Christian Church in Smyrna and that’s the reason for my title today:-

THE CHURCH AT SMYRNA NO PLACE FOR NOMINAL CHRISTIANS

Now Australia is a great place to live and we have wonderful freedom to worship but the downside of that is that it is so easy to be a nominal Christian. To simply go to church because you can choose to attend without fear of upsetting anyone. Unlike a country like China it doesn’t take great courage, great faith, great sacrifice to attend a Christian gathering in Australia. That doesn’t mean that for the majority of Christians in what we call the free world there is no

sacrificial commitment to Christ. Of course there is. But the difference is that we are allowed by the Society we live in to choose how committed we want to be as Christians.

That wasn't how it was for the Christians in Smyrna. The authorities in that City made it very clear to its citizens that anyone who chose to worship a God that did not allow them the right to firstly worship Caesar was in big trouble.

And especially in the City of Smyrna, where the Jewish population was fairly large and powerful, there was this group of orthodox Jews who for their own safety were prepared to set the authorities on their Christian neighbours. For their own spite ready to make up stories about them. And for their own profit cause Christians to be arrested for then they could claim their possessions, businesses, homes.

Is it any wonder that in this letter the Lord emphasizes the part played by the Jews and calls them 'a synagogue of Satan'.

So these Christians in Smyrna, who gathered together so faithfully, no doubt in secret, to worship God and to care for each other. These believers who were prepared to face imprisonment and eventual death rather than confess anyone but Jesus as their Lord. Did not do so because it was easy—it was far from easy. They did so because of the love they had for their Lord and their trust in Him to bring them one day into His eternal Kingdom.

And how well their Lord knew that. He knew what motivated all that they did for Him. No way could they ever become nominal Christians. The cost was too great for them to be anything but totally given over to Christ. So He begins His letter to them by proclaiming:

These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.

Straight away He confirms that He is the only Lord, for He is the first and the last. And has conquered death and therefore they can be assured that even if they died, He has the power to make them live again.

I know your afflictions, He says. The immense pressure, for that is what affliction means here, that they constantly lived under. The pressure of betrayal. The pressure of being found out. The pressure of the yearly demand to sacrifice to Caesar. The pressure of loosing children and family. goods and security. They faced that every day for Jesus, and He knew it.

I know your poverty. There are two words for poverty in the Greek. One refers to the poverty of a man who has to work for his living and has nothing over. He just gets by. The other refers to the person who has nothing whatsoever, and that is the word that is used here. Materially this church and the individuals within it were destitute and the Lord knew it.

Jesus knew all this about His people and yet He offers them no rescue. He doesn't say, "well if you had faith to claim material blessings from me and an easy life, I would give it to you". Not at all. He says, "be encouraged because you are rich."

Others may despise you for your lack of numbers and of wealth. Others may say that your God doesn't care for you or look after you as they see your poverty. But I know what I have reserved for you in glory and you are rich beyond anything you could ever imagine.

The position of persecution that you are in now is not good and it is going to get much worse. The devil is out to test you and some of you will end up in prison. Others will face severe persecution for a short period of time, and some will die.

But you have already shown yourself as faithful, and you will need to go on being faithful even to the point of death. But I who live will give you one day the victor's crown of life.

I was very moved recently by the story of 11 year old Jong-Cheol that was told in the Word For Today.....

There are still many Christians like those in Smyrna in the world today, and whatever we may think concerning them, they are rich. And they are also a challenge to us concerning what we are doing with our lives for Jesus.

Corrie Ten Boom tells a story of a group of believers who were meeting in an Iron Curtain country when the church door burst open and two Russian soldiers with submachine guns stormed in. They said they would give five minutes for anyone who wished to renounce Christ to leave, and those who stayed would be shot right then and there.

As each person searched his or her heart for the courage to face death, a few got up and left. The officers then walked to the door of the church, locked it, and turned to the congregation with these words, "*Brothers and sisters in Christ, we are believers, too, but we did not want to worship where everyone was not completely committed to Christ and willing to die for Him. May we become part of your fellowship?*"

That's a scary story, and it surely makes us all wonder how we would react if that were to happen here. The reality is that in the present time that is not likely for the Lord has not called us at this time to suffer that type of persecution. But He has called us to keep the Faith to the utmost because of our love for Him and that will mean standing against the devil's attacks, for the evil one will attack those that seek to live for Jesus.

He may attack us through our health or through the health of those we love. He may disrupt our very lives through the death or loss of one we depended upon. Or like Job we may endure the loss of income, possessions, or the support of family or children. And the evil one's aim is to draw us away from our faith in Jesus.

Particularly the devil seeks to make us afraid of being what Christ wants us to be and content to live a life for Jesus that at best is luke warm.

Against all this we need to believe strongly in the promises that Jesus gives the faithful in this letter. That what we have in Christ makes us richer than any other riches that we could ever hope to accrue in this world. If we believe that then surely there is nothing we wouldn't give or do for Him.

That one day He has reserved for us a crown in glory. A victors crown. And as Paul says in 2 Timothy 4:7-8

⁷ I have fought well. I have finished the race, and I have been faithful. ⁸ So a crown will be given to me for pleasing the Lord. He judges fairly, and on the day of judgment he will give a crown to me and to everyone else who wants him to appear with power.

And especially we have this promise that no one outside of Christ can ever claim. A promise that makes all that we endure for Christ now worthwhile, because it means that death for us has no fear. A promise found in the very last line of this compelling letter.

He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.

That promise is not about physical death. It's the death that follows God's judgment and is for the devil and those in his kingdom. Petterson calls it devil-death...a death from which there is no escape:-except through trust in Jesus.

Trust that overcomes all in the strength that Christ gives. Trust that never falters. Trust that gives our all for our Lord.

Trust that demands from each of us that totally full commitment that the Christians at Smyrna lived out so well.