

DATE of MESSAGE: February 7th, 2016

MESSAGE TITLE: An Open Letter to a Very Rich, Poor Church

SCRIPTURE: Revelation 2:8-11

GETTING STARTED

Churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia receive no rebuke from Jesus, who encourages them as they endure persecution. Roman Smyrna was a harbor city located 35 miles north of Ephesus. Smyrna is still a large sea port city with an estimated population of 200,000. The city at the time Jesus addressed the church was renowned for its temple to the Mother Goddess and for its providential imperial cult temples to Tiberius and Hadrian. One historian reported that Smyrna was a beautiful city possessing paved streets, a library, a gymnasium and a shrine to Homer who may have been born there. A few inscriptions point to a Jewish presence in the city. Jewish opposition to Christians in Smyrna was alleged in the martyrdom accounts of Polycarp and of Pionius (2nd and 3rd centuries respectively). It is in this context that Jesus delivers a message of encouragement and hope to persecuted believers.

OBSERVATION

How does Jesus reveal Himself to the believers in Smyrna? How might His self revelation encourage the church or give them hope?

What challenges does Jesus say confront this church (verse 9)? Could these challenges be related somehow?

How can Jesus say that the members of this church are both poor and rich at the same time? In what ways were they rich?

What kind of tribulation does Jesus say believers in this church will suffer? Does He promise that they will survive this impending persecution?

Who is immediately behind the persecution? How many does Jesus say will face imprisonment for their faith?

How does Jesus want them to respond to the persecution they must endure?

What reward does Jesus promise to those who endure their suffering? Read James 1:12 for another reference to this reward promised to faithful believers.

What does Jesus' promise of persecution say about His sovereignty?

APPLICATION

Read 2 Timothy 3:12-15. This is a promise of God from His word. When we think about promises from the Bible, we tend to think about passages that give us comfort and hope, not passages that promise suffering and persecution. How might this promise actually be a demonstration of God's mercy toward believers? All God's promises come with some condition – what is the condition for experiencing suffering according to verse 12? How does God expect us to respond to persecution? What would it look like for you to 'continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed' in the midst of persecution?

PRAYER

God, you have promised in your Word that we will face persecution for living godly lives. Please help us remember to lean on your grace and provision during times of hardship. Remind us of how rich we are in you because of the grace you have showered on us through your Son, Jesus Christ. Thank you for never leaving us or forsaking us!

SHARE POINT

Read Revelation 2:8-11 and review the application questions. Share with someone in your life how God's Word is changing you into a growing disciple. Encourage that person to do the same. That person could be a family member, a friend, a co-worker or a neighbor.

COMMENTARY NOTES

2:8 To a church already suffering slander and soon to face persecution unto death, Jesus identifies Himself as Israel's eternal Redeemer who prepared the way through death to resurrection life.

2:9 Physically poor, the Smyrnan believers were spiritually rich, whereas the Laodiceans thought themselves affluent but in Jesus' eyes were bankrupt. The church's opponents claim to be Jews but have no legitimate claim to that name. Quite to the contrary, they belong to the 'synagogue of Satan'. Believers in this church likely encountered persecution from two sources: a Jewish population strongly opposed to Christianity and a Gentile population loyal to Rome and supportive of emperor worship. Persecution and suffering were inevitable for believers in this environment.

2:10 A local synagogue of Jews was apparently engaged in slander against believers that would result in a number of church members being imprisoned for 10 days. All of this represented a test of their faith. The tribulation for the believers in Smyrna will be brief and may not end in release from prison but in martyrdom.

2:11 The crown of life is the laurel wreath of victory that God promises to those who love Him. The crown of life is also mentioned in James 1:12. Believers are encouraged to be faithful by contemplating what awaits them after death.

SOURCES CONSULTED

The ESV Study Bible

The HCSB Study Bible

Life Application Study Bible (NIV)

Serendipity Bible for Personal and Small Group Study

The Bible Knowledge Commentary of the New Testament