

I. Introduction

A. The presence of Jesus

1. Each message to the churches begins with Jesus and His real presence with each church in personal ways.
2. The presence of Jesus and our pursuit of intimacy with Him is of uttermost importance for our perseverance and our holiness.
3. *Our doctrines and theology calm our anxieties and bring organization to our beliefs, but when we experience the presence of Jesus through the Word and the Spirit, there is a peace that passes understanding and a love beyond knowledge.

B. Sherri's Smyrna reflections

II. Smyrna (Revelation 2:8-11)

A. Jesus (verse 8)

And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: "The words of the first and the last, Who died and came to life." (Revelation 2:8)

1. Description

- a. First and Last: All-encompassing supremacy; no one came before Him. He is the One to Whom all people will have to give an account for their lives.
*He came before and will outlast all.
- b. Died, came back to life: defied death, broke its power, and removed the grip of fear
*It doesn't mean we don't experience grief and sadness but there is no fear.

2. Why describe Jesus this way?

- a. Jesus suffered, died, and rose again to demonstrate how things work differently in the Kingdom for the family of God.
- b. Jesus identifies with the believers in Smyrna so that they realize and remember there is nothing they will experience that Jesus has not already gone through and that nothing they face has lasting consequences for them.
*There is nothing to fear because while they may experience Christ's sufferings, they will also experience Christ's glory!

B. Encouragement

I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. (Revelation 2:9-10)

1. Jesus knows (awareness and understanding)

- a. Their tribulation
 - 1) Matthew 24:9ff - Jesus has experienced and has warned them about His tribulation so that they expect it.

Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake. (Matthew 24:9)

- 2) You have dealt well with Your servant, O Lord, according to Your Word. Teach me good judgment and knowledge, for I believe in Your commandments. Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your Word. You are good and do good; teach me Your statutes. The insolent smear me with lies, but with my whole heart I keep Your precepts; their heart is unfeeling like fat, but I delight in Your law. It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn Your statutes. The law of Your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces. (Psalm 119:65-72)
- 3) Trials test what we really believe.
- b. Their poverty
 - 1) Persecution from the Jewish leaders and Roman government resulted in early Jesus followers not being able to work or had businesses shut down or boycotted.
 - 2) The spiritual reality is often the opposite of the material appearance and our self-evaluation is often not what God sees in us.
 - a) Humble servant vs great in Heaven
 - b) Save life and lose life vs lose life for Christ and save it
 - 3) *Their faithfulness in the midst of difficulty is bringing a depth of character and intimacy with Jesus now and storing up rewards and treasures for eternity later.
 - 4) *Whatever it costs to follow Jesus is worth the price.
- c. Slander
 - 1) Jews: not a hatred of Jews or anti-semitic; John was a Jew and the admonition is to be a witness to those who trouble them no matter who they are and let Jesus confront them
 - 2) Synagogue of Satan: a subset of the Jewish community in league with pagan ruling authorities
 - 3) Not Jews in character and obedience as the Torah tells them to love and treat one another well (i.e. when Jesus calls the Pharisees sons of their father the devil rather than Abraham)
2. Do not fear ...
 - a. You are about to suffer.
 - 1) Prison: not a punishment but a place awaiting sentence
 - 2) Consequences: forced labor, deportation, or even death
 - 3) Suffering has a limit (10 could be literal or symbolic, regardless, suffering will happen and will end)
 - b. You are being tested
 - 1) Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:2-4)

2) Validation and perfecting of real, living, enduring faith when surrendered to the Holy Spirit

3) *Note: Exodus 16:4 - Even blessings from God are a test of our loyalty, surrender, and obedience.

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Behold, I am about to rain bread from Heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in My law or not." (Exodus 16:4)

3. Be faithful

a. To what extent? Death

b. The same thing that Jesus experienced is shared with us: the crown of life, eternal life with the Father on the new Heaven and new Earth that fully eclipses the suffering for the short while in this lifetime.

*Cue Wilson Phillips ...

C. Polycarp in the gathering

1. Polycarp: disciple of John and resident of Smyrna, likely in the church at Smyrna when this letter was circulated and read

2. Became the bishop of Smyrna

3. Accused by the Jews

a. Teacher of Asia, father of the Christians

b. The puller down of our gods

c. One who teaches not to sacrifice and worship the imperial cult

4. At his death

a. Asked to make an oath to the imperial cult and revile Christ

b. Recorded responding, "For eighty and six years I have been His servant, and He has done me no wrong. And how can I now blaspheme my King Who saved me?"

c. Martyred: burned at the stake, but when the fire failed to consume his body, he was stabbed with a sword in 160AD

d. *Polycarp did not fear and was faithful to the end because he understood Jesus was with him.

III. About suffering/trials/persecution

A. Trials: suffering, hardship, persecution all existing in the realm of deserved and undeserved

B. We understand (or are familiar with) suffering both brought on by man (school shooting in Georgia), by sickness/disease, and by willful sin and a sinful world. Many in this room are examples of humility and faithfulness to Jesus in the midst of those trials.

C. We do not understand (nor are we familiar with) persecution because of our faith in Jesus.

1. Jesus promises us we will experience it.

2. We are recipients of God's graciousness in not experiencing it.

3. It **will** come for us or those who come after us.

4. Jesus' goal is that we would be ready so that we can faithfully persevere while experiencing great, circumstance-defying joy.

5. *How do we prepare? Intimacy with Jesus. Read *Insanity of God* by Nik Ripken

6. *Jesus never minimizes our pain or grief, but He does cast it in light of His death-defeating resurrection and ascension, promising a paradise of beauty, happiness, and glory forever and ever with Him and all those who have believed.
7. *We talk and teach about persecution so that when you follow Jesus and experience it, you will be ready and not lose your hope and joy. Just the opposite, that you will experience greater hope and joy in the midst of that persecution.