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Revelation 2:8-11

Fourth Message

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DEFYING DEATH

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

On September 11th, a new breed of terrorism was unleashed on the world. Among the thousands who died that day were nineteen men who voluntarily went to their own deaths. Until that day anti-terrorism experts had always assumed that hijackers wanted to stay alive. But these hijackers were willing to die for their cause. Indeed they gloried in their deaths, believing such death to be a fast track to Paradise.

This is a mindset completely alien to us. The U.S. devotes enormous resources to avoiding death. A substantial percentage of health care spending goes to prolonging life for the last few days. Advertising promotes the image of youth. When most people lived on farms, death was a fact of life with which all were familiar. But many now have no familiarity with death. Death frightens us. We want wars with no casualties on our side. On Friday the U.S. suffered its first combat fatality from enemy fire in Afghanistan. Will we now call for our troops to be brought home?

Today we turn to the message to the church in Smyrna. This, the second of the seven messages, is the briefest. It is the most positive message of the seven, yet we may not like its message, for it promises death as the expected fate of the believer.

A. The Message to the Church in Smyrna

Hear the word of the Lord Jesus Christ to the church in Smyrna:

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. 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. 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.

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. (Rev 2:8-11 NIV)

How are we to interpret these seven messages to the churches? Some interpretations argue that these seven messages represent seven ages of church history, for this book is prophetic. The message to Smyrna therefore addresses what to us is a past period of church history, and does not address us. But that does violence to the Biblical concept of prophecy. Prophecy is the word of the Lord for the present. It may certainly have ramifications for the future, but its intended audience is that which hears it from the Lord's prophet. These seven messages are addressed to seven churches in ca. AD 95. Each message contains imagery that is quite specific to the city being addressed. Hence I found it so helpful to visit six of these seven cities last June. We shall see that the message to the church in Smyrna makes many references to the situation in that city. Nevertheless,

each message is also addressed to all seven churches, for "he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Since the Book of Revelation has been incorporated into the canon of Scripture as God's Word, these messages are also addressed to us. Though this church in Cupertino in 2002 is quite different from the church in Smyrna in 95, we need to hear what the Spirit says to the church in Smyrna.

1. Smyrna

To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: (2:8a)

Ephesus, Smyrna and Pergamum vied for preeminence in the province of Asia. All three cities were of similar size, 200-250,000, with Ephesus being the largest. Pergamum was the original capital, but by the time of the writing of Revelation, Ephesus was the *de facto* capital if not yet the official one. Yet, despite the status of Pergamum and Ephesus, Smyrna claimed the title of "First in Asia," a title that it stamped on many of its coins. Smyrna's major claim to fame was its beauty. Strabo, a first century Roman geographer, acclaimed it as "the most beautiful city of all."

Smyrna lies at the end of a deep bay. The ancient Greek city was destroyed around 600 BC. For three hundred years Smyrna was a mere village before being refounded on a new site by Alexander the Great. Later citizens of Smyrna likened this to a phoenix rising from the ashes: the city had died and risen again. Smyrna was renowned for its loyalty to Rome, a loyalty that predated Rome's rise to dominance in the Mediterranean world. In 195 BC Smyrna built a temple dedicated to *Dea Roma*, the goddess Roma, the first city in Asia Minor to do so. In AD 24, during the reign of Tiberius, its loyalty was rewarded with permission to build a temple dedicated to the emperor. It was thus an important center of the imperial cult, of the worship of the emperor as divine.

Today Smyrna, renamed Izmir in the 1920s, is the third-largest city in Turkey. It is the only one of these seven cities with an unbroke church presence.

2. Self-description of Jesus

These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. (2:8b)

To the church in Smyrna Jesus describes himself as "the First and the Last, who died and came to life again." Smyrna claimed to be "First in Asia." But Jesus Christ is First of all. "First and Last" is a title borrowed from the Old Testament, where Isaiah uses it to describe God (Isa 44:6; 48:12). To apply it to anyone other than God would be blasphemy, but here is Jesus using the title of himself, and here is John ascribing him that title. Again we have this ascription to Jesus of language and imagery that belongs to God alone. There are three synonymous titles: the First and the Last, the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. John applies these progressively to God and to Jesus, until by the end of the book all three are applied to Jesus (22:13).

Smyrna likened itself to a phoenix, risen from the ashes. But Jesus describes himself as the one who has died and come to life. We'll see that this description has particular relevance for the church in Smyrna.

The citizens of Smyrna gloried in their city. But the church in Smyrna is to glory in Christ. It is he not the city who is First. It is he not the city that has risen triumphant from death. While yet living in Smyrna, they are members of the Church, of which Jesus is the head. They are part of the body of Christ: a glorious body and a glorious Christ.

3. Prophetic Message

As in the other six messages, Jesus' prophetic message to the church in Smyrna contains both a statement of his knowledge concerning affairs in Smyrna, and a prophetic pronouncement based upon that knowledge. There are many similarities between the messages to the churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia. These are the only two churches that receive no chastisement, only commendation. To the church in Smyrna, Jesus says,

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. (2:9)

Two things about the church in Smyrna have come to the attention of Jesus: her afflictions and her poverty. The word translated as "afflictions" can also be rendered "tribulation." Most Christians in America have been taught that the Great Tribulation lies in the future, and that it will last for seven years. At some point during these seven years the Rapture will occur, whereby Christians are snatched up out of the earth, thus escaping the suffering on earth. The only question is whether the Rapture will occur before, during or after the tribulation. Many preachers will tell you that it is vitally important to figure out if you are pre-trib, mid-trib, or post-trib. Many churches write their position into their doctrinal statement. They will refuse you membership if you take the wrong position. Mid-trib professors cannot get teaching jobs at pre-trib seminaries. As I say this, you are either fuming because I've trodden on your toes, or your eyes are glazed over because you don't know what I'm talking about!

The Great Tribulation does not lie in the future. The tribulation is now and it has been now for a long time. The New Testament epistles tell us repeatedly that we should not be surprised at suffering. Indeed, they tell us that the believer should expect to suffer. Suffering was certainly the lot of the Church in the first 300 years. The pre-trib, mid-trib, and post-trib positions are recent ones; they could only have been developed in a climate where the Church does not suffer. Try having a debate about the relationship between the Rapture and the Great Tribulation with Christians in Indonesia or Pakistan, where they are being killed by Moslem fanatics! Or with Christians in China who refuse to be part of the government-sanctioned church. Or with Christians in any of the other countries around the world where they are facing persecution. That would be to belittle their present experience of tribulation. A promise of escaping tribulation through the Rapture would be meaningless to them. They are in the midst of tribulation right now.

Why is there tribulation? The Book of Revelation does not give us an answer until chapter 12. There is a dragon loose in the world; the dragon is Satan. First he sought to devour Christ, but God blocked him by snatching Jesus up to heaven. Next Satan tried to devour the Church, but God again blocked him. Satan next turns to the saints, the individual believers. This time God does not block him. Why

does God allow Satan to go after the saints? In the words of William Cowper that we sang,

God moves in a mysterious way
his wonders to perform.

If we learn these hymns by heart, we can recall them to mind and find great comfort. The last verse reads,

Blind unbelief is sure to err
and scan his works in vain;
God is his own interpreter
and he will make it plain.

If we look at the world through unbelieving eyes there is much that does not make sense, much that is grievous. But when we look through believing eyes we can trust that God knows what he is doing, that he is working out his purposes. I have called this series "The Seen and the Unseen." The Book of Revelation opens our eyes to the unseen realms to see that God is on the throne and that he is steadily working out his purposes, even through the suffering of his saints.

The church in Smyrna was in the midst of the tribulation at the end of the first century. Their poverty is probably a result of this tribulation. Most likely they were shut out of the local economy because of their loyalty to Christ. Smyrna was a prosperous port and a wealthy city, yet in the midst of such wealth the Christians were poor. But Jesus assures them that they are in fact rich. The Revelation opens our eyes to the unseen realms. In the seen world the believers in Smyrna are poor, but in the unseen world they are rich.

Jesus accredits this tribulation, at least in part, to "those who say they are Jews and are not." Most probably these are non-Christian Jews. For the first several decades the Christians were regarded as a sect of Judaism. The Romans regarded them as such. The Jews regarded them as such. The Christians saw themselves as such, while they resisted the pressure to require Gentile believers to become Jews. Wherever Paul went he first went to the synagogue, but the Book of Acts shows that everywhere he was forced to leave. The decisive break came with the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. As the Romans approached the city following the outbreak of the Second Jewish War in AD 66, the Christians within Jerusalem fled the city. This was proof to the Jews that the Christians were not really Jews after all. Shortly after the fall of the city, the Jewish community incorporated into its daily prayers a curse on the Christians, the so-called *birkhat ha-Minim*: "Let the Nazarenes (Christians) and sectarians (*minim*) vanish in a moment! Blot them out of the book of life and do not record them among the righteous."

The Jews were granted certain rights by the Romans. The Romans had learnt that the Jews would rather die than be forced to engage in idolatrous practices. They were therefore exempt from the usual requirements of emperor worship, and also from military service which required obeisance to the idolatrous symbols of Rome. We can imagine the Jews denouncing the Christians to the Romans, telling them that they were not a Jewish sect at all, and that therefore they were not covered by these exemptions. The Jews claimed that the Christians were not Jews at all. But Jesus says that the behavior of the Jews shows that they are not real Jews; they are not acting as God's people. By opposing God's people they are functioning as a synagogue of Satan, as a Satanic congregation. Tough words indeed.

The church in Smyrna is a suffering church. What word of encouragement will Jesus give to such a church?

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. (2:10)

Some word of encouragement! Jesus makes it clear that their sufferings will continue. They will be thrown into prison. That might not seem too harsh a word for us in 2002. But in the ancient world, people were not sentenced to terms in prison. Prisons were holding centers for those awaiting trial, or for those awaiting execution. Jesus tells these Christians that they are to expect to die.

They will suffer persecution for ten days. It is certain that ten here is a symbolic number, but commentators differ as to whether ten days represents a long period of time or a short period of time. I take it as representing a complete but short period of time. Their suffering will last a complete period of time, but it will be only days not years. However, it is clear that the release which brings their suffering to an end is not freedom but death.

How are the Christians in Smyrna to face such suffering? Jesus gives them two commands: fear not, and be faithful. Two very simple commands, yet both very challenging. What does it mean to be faithful? In the context of the Book of Revelation, it means to bear witness to God and to Jesus. It means to avoid the triple deception of the dragon, the false prophet and Babylon: the deception of the dragon to oppose God, the deception of the false prophet to worship the beast and his image, the deception of Babylon to be intoxicated with her wares. Bearing witness does not mean keeping track of how many doors we knock on, of how many people we talk with each week about Christ. It's about loyalty. Smyrna had a reputation for loyalty to Rome. Christians are to have a reputation for loyalty to Jesus Christ.

It is clear that to be a faithful witness entails death. All of the faithful saints in the book end up dead. This was the fate of Antipas of Pergamum, whom Jesus describes as "my faithful witness" (2:13). This also was the fate of Jesus himself, described in the salutation as "the faithful witness" (1:5). Indeed the motivation to be a faithful witness comes from observing that this is just what Jesus did. We're all familiar with the WWJD slogan: what would Jesus do? That's a good question to ask. In the context of Revelation, Jesus would have been the faithful witness, faithful unto death. Indeed, he was. As the word of God he bore witness to God, and for that he was killed. The saints are called to walk in his footsteps.

Jesus follows up his two commands with a promise: to the saints in Smyrna who are faithful he will give a reward, the crown of life. The word for crown here, *stephanos*, from which we get our name Stephen, signifies a victor's wreath. This would be a familiar symbol in Smyrna, for the city hosted regular athletic contests, in which each victor was awarded a victory wreath. The victory for which the saints are awarded their wreath is not winning a race or a wrestling match, but winning a fight to the death, and they are the ones who die! The wreath is won simply by remaining faithful to the end. What is this victory wreath? It is life itself! The death of the saints ushers them into life.

4. Promise to the Victor

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. (2:11)

Jesus ends his message to the church in Smyrna with a promise to the overcomer, the one who conquers, who is victorious. He assures him that he will not be hurt at all by the second death. This imagery of the second death reappears at the end of the book. The second death is the lake of fire (20:14; 21:8), the eternal destiny of all who are opposed to God. It is the destiny of the dragon (20:10), of the beast and the false prophet (19:20), of death and Hades (20:14), and of all whose names are not in the book of life (20:15). It is the place of eternal separation from God. This might seem a harsh idea to us, and many have tried to water it down, either by denying the existence of hell or by arguing for annihilation. But this is a very necessary idea. If God is to extend the holiness of heaven to earth, then he must remove all that is unholy from earth. His people he makes into saints, that is, ones who are holy. He thereby fits them for heaven. The rest he removes from the earth to a place of eternal separation from himself. Since all life is mediated by God, I cannot envision what life totally separated from God can possibly be like. Even the existence that Satan has at the moment is permitted him by God. A time is coming when God will remove all contamination of evil. Then he will be able to join heaven and earth together in a realm of complete holiness. The new heavens and the new earth that John sees at the end of the book are not possible until God banishes to the second death all that is opposed to him.

This eternal destiny in realms beyond earth is also an extension of life here on earth. I find considerable wisdom in C. S. Lewis' words in his Preface to *The Great Divorce*,

Earth, I think, will not be found by anyone to be in the end a very distinct place. I think earth, if chosen instead of Heaven, will turn out to have been, all along, only a region in Hell; and earth, if put second to Heaven, to have been from the beginning a part of Heaven itself.

The faithful witness need not fear the second death, for he has already participated in the first resurrection (20:5). Contrary to some interpretations of the book of Revelation, I understand this first resurrection as taking place at the moment of the believer's physical death. At that moment he is ushered into the presence of God. These are the ones who have been killed "because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God," which is interpreted as meaning "they had not worshiped the beast or his image" (20:4).

And in this the believer is victorious. The Book of Revelation presents a topsy-turvy world of the victorious Christian life. The saints are all killed, going down to apparent defeat, but therein lies their victory. The dragon and the beast wage war against the saints and conquer them; the way they conquer is with death (11:7; 13:7). The saints are killed for their faithfulness to Jesus, for their refusal to worship the beast. But the tables are turned as the saints emerge victorious from death, for physical death is not the end. How do they conquer? They conquer through two things: the blood of the Lamb and the faithful testimony that they bear to Jesus (12:11; 15:2). They are victorious because Jesus has gone before them and has conquered Satan and death through his blood (5:5; 17:14). And they are victorious because they bear faithful witness to Jesus, who himself is the faithful witness. All they have to do to be victorious is to follow Jesus, holding on to him. For Jesus, the faithful witness, is also the firstborn from the dead, who will lead his followers through death. This topsy-turvy world is encapsulated within the twin images of Jesus as Lion and as Lamb. In chapter 5, John hears one of the elders proclaim, "See, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah...has triumphed (conquered)" (5:5). But what he sees is "a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain" (5:6).

Just sixty years after this letter was written, ca. 155, Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna, was killed. He was an old man of 86 years. He was a young man when the Book of Revelation was written. Perhaps he was present in the church in Smyrna when this message was read out. Polycarp was arrested and brought to the stadium where a crowd had gathered to watch the games. As he was bringing him to the stadium, the *irenarch*, the equivalent of our chief of police, asked him, "What harm is there in saying, Lord Ceasar?" Once inside the stadium, Polycarp was brought before the proconsul, the governor of the province, who said, "Swear by the fortune of Caesar; repent... I will set thee at liberty, reproach Christ." But Polycarp replied, "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?" The proconsul sent a herald into the center of the stadium to proclaim, "Polycarp has confessed himself a Christian." Then he had Polycarp burnt alive. Though it was the Sabbath day, the Jews helped collect wood for the fire. They betrayed their own understanding of God's law to murder God's faithful witness.

Polycarp was killed for his faithful witness. The Greek word for witness is *martyrs*. So common was it for Christ's witnesses to be killed during these first 300 years of the church that the word came to mean those who had died for their witness, the martyrs.

B. Defying Death

The American church is not a suffering church. Death is not the expected lot of those who bear faithful testimony to Jesus. We do not live in risk of our lives. Yet I fear that many of us share the culture's fear of death. How do we live our lives in a way that defies death? Not the sort of defiance that would fly an airplane into the World Trade Center. But the defiance that would stand up to the authorities and quietly say, "So many years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?"

Maybe none of us will be called to die for our faith. But that does not mean the message to the church in Smyrna has no relevance for us. We are all called to a life of faithful witness. Those who are spared the second death are those who have refused to bow down and worship the beast and his image, and have refused the mark of the beast. This does not mean that we avoid carrying a credit card, or having a Social Security Number. It means we avoid getting entangled in the Satanic deceptions of this world. The Church is a colony of heaven on earth, an outpost of the kingdom of God. Where this kingdom confronts the kingdom of Satan there will necessarily be tribulation. No matter what form that tribulation takes we are to remain faithful. We are not to lash out, nor to respond in kind, nor to fret, nor to despair, nor to lose hope, nor even to be surprised. All we are called to do is rest in the Lord and be faithful. To enable us to do that we have been given eternal life. Literally this phrase means not everlasting life but "life of the ages," that is, life of the ages to come, the life of the new heavens and the new earth. Since we already have been given this life, we can face death without fear; the second death cannot harm us.

It is really very simple. All that Jesus asks us to do is to be faithful. This might seem like a little thing, but as Hudson Taylor said, "a little thing is a little thing, but faithfulness in a little thing is a great thing." God doesn't call for spectacular heroics, yet being a faithful witness to the point of death is spectacular. So spectacular that in the first three centuries of the church many, many were converted through watching the martyrdom of the faithful saints. What was it, the spectators asked, that enabled these humble Christians to face death without fear? God makes the faithful witness of his saints very attractive to those who are seeking life. How many of us here came to faith through observing the faithful witness of another believer?

Grace and peace to you from the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. (1:5)

Go and follow in his footsteps.

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