

The Apocalypse | Finding Composure in the Unveiled Christ

“The Seven Churches (Part Two)”

Revelation 2.8-11; 3.8-14

5.2.21

*2.8 "And to the angel of the church in **Smyrna** write: The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this: ⁹ 'I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰ 'Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹ 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.'*

*3.7 "And to the angel of the church in **Philadelphia** write: He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens, says this: ⁸ 'I know your deeds. Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, because you have a little power, and have kept My word, and have not denied My name. ⁹ 'Behold, I will cause those of the synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie -- I will make them come and bow down at your feet, and make them know that I have loved you. ¹⁰ 'Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth. ¹¹ 'I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, so that no one will take your crown. ¹² 'He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it anymore; and I will write on him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God, and My new name. ¹³ 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'*

We're THREE WEEKS into this series on the Big Wave – The Apocalypse or Book of Revelation.

Chapters Two and Three are maybe the most often tackled sections when it comes to sermons. Last week we looked at the two churches in the most critical condition (Ephesus and Laodicea – the first and seventh) and this week, the two churches in the best shape.

Only these two churches, Smyrna and Philadelphia, get no word of correction from Jesus Christ, the Faithful Witness. Last week, the churches THOUGHT they had it all together but it was just the opposite.

This week's churches LOOK like they're in real trouble ("tribulation, poverty...little strength") but the Head of the Church gives them the highest marks!

The words to Smyrna and Philadelphia have a lot in common; they're a deliberate match. And one thing they share is IMPENDING pain. They're both about to undergo great hardship and the two messages supply warning and hope. This, we could say, is the big purpose of Revelation: hope for churches in distress.

These two groups are notified – "suffering is coming and here's what you'll need to get through it with poise/fortitude...and even growth."

What to do when you learn that pain is coming your way? Whether it's suffering for your faith or suffering in ways common to everyone – when you're told to "brace yourself" for a period of difficulty – how do you do that? What resources are available in the Gospel (basic message of Christianity) to bring us through suffering with composure and even growth?

Let's look at: 1) Anticipated Hardship 2) Sources of Composure 3) Bringing Composure into the Pain

These two churches have NOT had it easy and it's going to get worse. The first church at Smyrna has had "tribulation" (again – that's a buzzword in modern end-times discussions and Smyrna is IN tribulation!) and poverty. Maybe their non-Christian friends and neighbors have made it hard on them – maybe they'd lost jobs because they're persisting as Christians.

And additionally, they're being slandered. Many of them were Jewish and still maintained ties with their local synagogues... but their Jewish friends are NOT SO FRIENDLY anymore. In fact, they've perhaps declared that these believers in Jesus of Nazareth can no longer be considered true Jews.

And just as Jesus had told His Jewish brothers and sisters that THEY had departed from the essence of their own Scriptures in favor of manmade traditions and they had lost the focus on GRACE in the Hebrew Bible – and they no longer really held to the faith of Abraham, which REALLY infuriated the Jewish leaders (murderously angry!) – SO ALSO, the Jews in these two cities saw many fellow Jewish people now believing in Jesus as the Messiah, enjoying grace and even inviting Gentiles to unite with Abraham's God by believing in Jesus... and it made them ANGRY!

Truth is: the Christians – some Jewish and some Gentile – suddenly looked a lot more like Abraham than the synagogue members did. And Jesus Christ tells His people, "These Jews who are slandering you are only related to Abraham physically/genetically but NOT in their faith. In terms of a spiritual connection – My people are the true children of Abraham! AND THEY are Jewish in name only."

Then He calls them, IN BOTH these messages, “a synagogue of Satan”. In 2.10 he’s called the “devil” which may be a triple play-on-words – devil is the Greek word “diabolo” meaning slanderer and he is indeed using the synagogue to slander Christians.

And diabolo is literally to “throw through” (as in throw gossip through a crowd) and the diabolo is going to “bolo” or “throw” some of you in prison (2.10).

One more point here and that is: I know your tribulation and your poverty and how you've been slandered by religious people you once considered to be brothers – BUT, it’s going to get worse.

The first church, Smyrna, will face prison and more tribulation for a defined period (“ten days” which is likely a symbol for ten weeks or months...years?) And the Philadelphia church will face the same PLUS some sort of testing/temptation that will come upon the whole world: “the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world...”

It could’ve been a disease or an earthquake or an economic collapse or a war – we don’t really know but it’s coming.

Now, before we look at what Jesus Christ offers to these churches in the hardship that’s coming – let me ask YOU if you’ve ever been in this place.

Have you ever faced what the British call “redundancies” (we call them LAY-OFFS) and you know you can be called in anytime (your days are numbered)?

Have you ever been diagnosed with some disease that will require painful treatment (or worse)?

Have you ever been the only Christian at a gathering or a party and you’re pretty sure you're going to be the piñata – people waiting to take swipes at you?

Or have you surveyed the damage after a hurricane and you realize you have months of work ahead of you in this “hour of testing that’s come upon the whole world”? Or an all-consuming project at work? A Divorce?

And what do you do... when you know that surgery is now only ten days away...nine...eight...seven? How do you sleep knowing that your supervisor really has it IN for you and it’s just a matter of time before she “drops the hammer” and shames you in front of the whole team...or WORSE...the water is starting to boil?

Sometimes our worrying is worse than the actual pain when it arrives...other times, we feel cheated because, “no one told me it was going to be THIS bad!” (Well, what if they HAD?)

Do you suffer well? NOT stoic (stuffing your pain) and NOT consumed by it or assuming the victim-identity but composed... and even serene ...and even sort of spiritually inquisitive as to how God is going to meet you and make deep changes in you through this hardship?

Well, more on that kind of curiosity and spiritual anticipation in a moment but FIRST, what IS the help the Gospel can be to us in that moment before the rollercoaster drops?

Well, Jesus Christ comes to these churches identifying Himself from the picture/titles CH 1 – “The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this...” (and again in Ch 3) “He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens, says this...”

He tells these churches, “I am the eternal One – the Potentate of Time... the words ‘too late’ don’t apply to Me. I am the Holy One and the True One – I am God come down, God incarnate...”

“Who was dead and has come to life” – always focusing our attention on the truth that He died in our place but IS ALIVE (it’s Easter every day!) As if to say, “I handled the ultimate hardship...I can be trusted with these smaller difficulties...like cancer and lay-offs... I specialize in bringing Ultimate Good out of the worst of all hardships – even death itself!”

And to the church at Philadelphia Jesus identifies as the One who “has the key of David who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens, says this...” And if we knew the Hebrew Bible like the original recipients did, we’d recognize these odd words from the Prophet Isaiah.

There was a period of political corruption in Israel and no leader could be found to serve as prime minister. The last one was busy building monuments to himself and buying fancy cars (chariots).

And God says, “I’m going to crumble you up and throw you in the trash! AND then I’m going to set up My chosen leader, Eliakim (“God sets up”) and I will give him the key of David to open the door no one can shut and shut the door no one can open.”

And God says, “this one will be so trustworthy that you can hang all the needs on him – he’ll be like a peg hammered into a wall that can support anything you drape over it... AND THEN, the peg will break and be cut off...” It’s a prophecy of Jesus Christ.

He can handle anything we entrust to Him... and He was cut off for us... He carried all our burdens and sins and died in our place... AND THEN was raised to show that, “YES, because of My righteous life, sacrificial death and resurrection DEATH HAS DIED!”

“And YOU are free! You're forgiven – I have opened the door to heaven to you and no one can shut it!”

And the believers in Philadelphia are told that Jesus Christ is the ONE God has set up (the true Eliakim) who carried our faults and bore the crushing burden for US – He turned the Key of David and the government will be on His shoulders – He's the once and future King who will rule the whole universe with perfect justice.”

It's is a vivid and picturesque image to the Philadelphians – “in the midst of ANY trial or hardship I AM CARRYING YOU! I'm the One who turns disaster into redemption – so trust Me!”

Now, how to bring this gift of composure INTO the pain and even INTO the anticipation of the pain when you're told, “brace yourself, you're in for a whole lot of hurt...”

Well, it begins with the recognition of adversity – in the world, there are spiritual things going on behind the scenes. Revelation pictures this in terms of a war and a love-story, a Husband coming to rescue His bride – Christ and the Church.

In the spiritual life you have to see: there's great and overwhelming opposition. My years of reading the Psalms left me with THAT big observation: almost every Psalm speaks of enemies and adversity that only God can defeat.

It's not people (Eph 6.12) but spiritual forces behind the people. Behind these super-legalistic, self-righteous, transactional-religion “synagogues of Satan” was the accuser himself, blinding people to God's grace. And we have to constantly resist our tendencies to think it all depends on US (as the accuser WANTS us to believe) and instead to see that it depends on our Eliakim! That's how the Christian faces impending hardship – from that platform.

And the Gospel sees past outward appearances. They thought they were poor and materially they MAY have been but Jesus Christ sees how firmly they depend on Him and KNOW HIM and says, “I see you NOT as poor but RICH! You know Me!”

If we have Him – we have everything! The wealthiest human being who doesn't know God in Jesus Christ is bankrupt in comparison with a poor street sweeper in Calcutta (Kolkata) who knows God through faith in Jesus Christ.

See yourself as God sees you – maybe materially poor but “you are rich” (2.9) if you're in Christ!

Also, know that whatever the trial is – it won't be forever. God doesn't always give us the limits as He did here (“ten days”) but at the very worst, it will end at death... “Weeping may endure for a night but JOY comes in the morning” (Ps 30). So if you're going through hell...KEEP GOING!

Lastly, this composure the Gospel provides is both a cultivated benefit and a super-natural benefit. Let me explain.

It's not the kind of thing we pull out of our hat when we get the cancer diagnosis. It's something we cultivate every day. We remind ourselves of who Jesus Christ IS and what He has done. We sing about it and we confess our sins into it and we labor to see ourselves how He sees us daily.

We pray the Gospel into our lives deliberately and regularly (not just when we sense our need) because sense it or not, we're always in need.

But it's more than just a mental exercise. We're NOT trying to psyche ourselves out or simply change our thinking (though that's a part of it).

But all the while we're "holding fast" (see 3.11) to Him, HE IS COMING TO US. "I am coming quickly" (not a promise of His second coming).

Jesus is doing stuff. He's alive and He's holding us and coming to us with supernatural help. It's a promise to be received and a help to be expected.

David wrote (Ps 63.7-8), "My soul follows hard after You – YOUR right hand upholds me."

He is holding us – that's why/how we're holding fast to Him... And in the end, He will crown us with life, claim us (by His Name) and set us as pillars, useful, belonging, stable – composed in His House...and then we'll see that these troubles we fear were actually shaping us and freeing us from our fears and our faults... preparing us for HOME.