

THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Christ's Imperial-Prophetic Address to the Church in Smyrna (2.8-11)



The Martyrdom of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna (156 AD)

I. Review From Last Week (Rev 1.17-2.7)

1. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last,¹⁸ and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades." (Rev 1.17-18)
2. The Imperial-Prophetic Address to the Church in Ephesus (2.1-7)
 - a. Historical context: Ephesus in the Roman empire and early Christianity
 - b. Jesus is the one who walks among the seven golden lampstands
 - c. church in Ephesus commended for toil and perseverance, especially in matters of doctrinal orthodoxy (e.g., they test false apostles)
 - d. church is rebuked for abandoning first love (love for one-another, which is the church's chief apologetic; waning zeal for Gospel-witness)
 - e. promise to eat from Tree of Life, in the paradise of God

II. Historical Context of Christ's Address to the Church in Smyrna

1. Smyrna in the First Century
 - a. Strabo: "the most beautiful city" (*Geographica* 14.1.37)
 - b. rebuilt by Alexander the Great on Mt. Pagos (circular street lined with public buildings and temples called "the crown of Smyrna")
 - c. port city; lots of commerce/wealth
 - d. various temples (inc. goddess Roma); won competition (with ten other cities) to build temples in honour of Augustus, Livia, and the Senate (23-26 AD)

2. *Excursus*: Why were Christians persecuted in the Roman empire?
 - a. political, religious, cultural, and social values and beliefs were inextricably interwoven
 - b. excerpt from Pliny to the Emperor Trajan:

(Pliny the Younger was governor of Pontus/Bithynia from 111-113 AD. He wrote the emperor Trajan on a variety of administrative and political matters. In this letter, he asks the emperor whether his response to Christians is appropriate.)

I have observed the following procedure: I interrogated them to find out whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed. For I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished. Soon accusations spread, as usually happens, because of the proceedings going on, and several incidents occurred. An anonymous document was published containing the names of many persons. I released those who denied that they were or had been Christians, and who worshipped your image and the statues of the gods, and cursed Christ (none of which those who are really Christians, it is said, can be forced to do).

They asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food – but ordinary and innocent food. Even this, they affirmed, they had ceased to do after my edict by which, in accordance with your instructions, I had forbidden political associations. Accordingly, I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses. But I discovered nothing else but depraved, excessive superstition ...

The contagion of this superstition has spread not only to the cities but also to the villages and farms. But it seems possible to check and cure it. It is certainly quite clear that the temples, which had been almost deserted, have begun to be frequented, that the established religious rites, long neglected, are being resumed, and that from everywhere sacrificial animals are coming, for which until now very few purchasers could be found. (*Ep.* 10.96)

c. *pax romana, pax deorum*: Roman peace depends on the peace of the gods

Cicero: “Who, once convinced that divinity does exist, can fail at the same time to be convinced that it is by its power that this great empire has been created, extended, and sustained. However good be our conceit of ourselves, conscript fathers, we have excelled neither Spain in population, nor Gaul in vigour, nor Carthage in versatility, nor Greece in art, nor indeed Italy and Latium itself in the innate sensibility characteristic of this land and its peoples; but in piety, in devotion to religion, and in that special wisdom which consists in the recognition of the truth that the world is swayed and directed by divine disposal, we have excelled every race and nation.” (*De haruspicum responsis* IX.19; “Concerning the Response of the Soothsayers” 9.19)

d. Jews and Christians in the Roman Empire

i. Jewish Diaspora

ii. Jews had a precarious social standing: they were given special legal status (because of antiquity and sacrifice); however, persecution was common

iii. conflict between church and synagogue

Acts 17.1-9: Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. ² And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³ explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.’ ⁴ And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. ⁵ But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. ⁶ And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, ‘These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, ⁷ and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.’ ⁸ And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. ⁹ And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.

Acts 18.12-17: But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal, ¹³ saying, ‘This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law.’ ¹⁴ But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, ‘If it were a matter of wrongdoing or vicious crime, O Jews, I would have reason to accept your complaint. ¹⁵ But since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves. I refuse to be a judge of these things.’ ¹⁶ And he drove them from the tribunal. ¹⁷ And they all seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to any of this.

III. Christ's Imperial-Prophetic Address to the Church in Smyrna (2.8-11)

And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: "The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. ⁹ '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. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death'."

1. Basic Structure of the Imperial-Prophetic Addresses to the Seven Churches
 - a. command to write
 - b. Christ identifies himself (cf. Rev 1.9-20)
 - c. commendation
 - d. rebuke/accusation (not in address to church in Smyrna)
 - e. exhortation to repentance (exhortation to church in Smyrna, but not to repent)
 - f. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."
 - g. promise to the one who conquers

2. **Christ's self-identification:** "The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life." (2.8)
 - a. divine sovereignty (over the devil and tribulation)

Isaiah 44.6: Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: "I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god."
 - b. Christ is the living one; death has been conquered – hence, "do not fear" (2.10)

3. **Commendation:** "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." (2.9)
 - a. Tribulation and poverty (economic consequence of faithfulness)
 - b. slander (see above)
 - c. synagogue of Satan

Galatians 6.15-16: For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. ¹⁶ And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.

Philippians 3.3: For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.

1 Peter 2.9-10: But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

4. **Exhortation and Promise:** “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.” (2.10)

- a. the devil (spiritual conflict unveiled, but not outside Christ's sovereignty)
- b. prison: served 3 purposes in Roman empire: (1) to compel obedience to the order of the magistrate; (2) confine accused until trial; (3) detain convicted until execution
- c. tested for 10 days: a defined time of testing, set by Christ (cf. Isaiah 26.19-27.1; Dan 1.12-15)

1 Peter 1.3-6: Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,⁴ to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you,⁵ who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.⁶ In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials,⁷ so that the tested genuineness of your faith – more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Hebrews 10:32 But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings,³³ sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated.³⁴ For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.³⁵ Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward.

- d. the martyr's crown (*stephanos*; cf. Acts 7; 2 Timothy 4.8)

The Martyrdom of Polycarp (d. 156 AD) (“martyr” = witness; “martyrdom” = testimony)

The chief of police, Herod, met him and tried to persuade him, “why is it so wrong to save yourself by saying, ‘Caesar is lord,’ and making the sacrifice?” He remained silent.

Polycarp's testimony: “For 86 yrs I have served him, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my king who has saved me?”

The crowd: “This is the teacher of impiety, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our own gods, the one who teaches many not to sacrifice or worship the gods.”

5. **Promise:** “The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.” (2.11)
- a. second death: final condemnation at last judgment

Revelation 20.14-15: Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵ And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

b. the hope of the resurrection and eternal life

Isaiah 26.19-27.1: Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead. ²⁰ Come, my people, enter your chambers, and shut your doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until the fury has passed by. ²¹ For behold, the LORD is coming out from his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity, and the earth will disclose the blood shed on it, and will no more cover its slain. **27:1** In that day the LORD with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea.

1 Corinthians 15.51-58: Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, ⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. ⁵³ For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. ⁵⁴ When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.' ⁵⁵ 'O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?' ⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁵⁸ Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.