

Dying to Live **Revelation 2:8-11**

In Roman times, Smyrna (modern Izmir) was a sizeable port city, with an excellent harbor. Commerce brought wealth. The city was also known for science, medicine, and fine wine. It lay forty miles north of Ephesus, its main rival for regional prominence. With a population estimated at 100,000, the city had several prominent temples, including to Asclepius, the god of healing, and to emperors. The imperial cult was a prominent feature of urban civilization and village life, with numerous offerings during the year, especially in conjunction with special celebrations. Refusal to participate meant not only exclusion from public life, but also disapprobation as political disloyalty, resulting in ostracism and persecution. The church of Smyrna is one of the only two churches among the seven to receive an entirely positive message.

Day 1: Revelation 2:8 The First and the Last

This title for Jesus recalls the descriptions in Revelation 1 (1:17), and derives originally from Isaiah. There the title captures YHWH's claim to be the effective force in history who empowers and defeats all nations (Isa 41:4). He, not any superpower or its emperor, is sovereign. He is beyond compare or rival, and brings his power to bear on behalf of his people (Isa 44:6): "apart from [him] there is no god"; certainly no emperor merits the title. He – and no idol – created heaven and earth, and he will bring down all who oppose him, whether Babylonian (Isa 48:12-15) or Roman (Rev 2:8). As the First and the Last, he created all things and outlasts all things.

What Isaiah says of YHWH, John says of Jesus. With this title, John sends two messages to his readers, ancient and modern. First, of course, Jesus is divine. Secondly, whatever threat they face from empire, emperor, or life in general, he who is for them is greater than all that is against. They – and we – may not see it immediately, as the Roman empire crushes all in its path, and overwhelms the fledgling Church. But the same was once true of the Babylonians, who conquered and exiled Judah, before fading into the annals of history. Though the dominant superpower in Isaiah's day, Babylonia is an ancient footnote by the time of Revelation, while the people of God endure. The same, John implies, will prove true again: God is First and Last, not Rome; he – and his people – will survive long after Rome falls into oblivion. While John's readers had to take that promise on faith and on the precedent of Babylonian history, we have seen it proven true: the Roman empire long since fell, but the people of God remain.

Whatever power or threat challenges the Church anywhere today will meet the same fate: only Christ is First and Last; he – and his people – will endure when their oppressors fall.

Day 2: Revelation 2:8 Who died and came to life again.

The second title for Jesus is rich with meaning. In juxtaposition, the successive titles are heavily ironic: “The First and the Last, who died and came to life again.” The immortal dies; the pre-existing comes back to life. A mystery and a marvel.

Furthermore, as in 2:1-7, this title fits the situation of the church. The Christians in Smyrna face persecution; some will even die. Yet just as Christ died and came to life, so will they: “Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

This is less an assurance for us than for the church in countries where persecution and execution threaten (as in contemporary Iran, where a Muslim convert turned pastor currently awaits martyrdom, if his sentence is not commuted). Still it applies to us, both specifically (when we die, even if not by persecution, we have the promise of resurrection), and generically (Jesus ultimately delivers eventually from whatever threatens us, even when that threat is something other than persecution or martyrdom).

Day 3: Revelation 2:9a Poor yet rich

Economically poor, yet spiritually rich: this paradox encapsulates the status of the Christians in Smyrna. Its excellent port brought the city considerable wealth, but persecution of the church likely included the confiscation of their possessions, and identification as Christians likely resulted in job discrimination. At the same time, and for the same reasons, their commitment to Christ brought spiritual wealth, and the promise of great reward in heaven.

John’s comments most likely reflect his audience’s understandable discomfort. Living in a prosperous city, while forfeiting their wealth, the believers in Smyrna would naturally feel inferior, and would genuinely be impoverished. Patience, John counsels, for time will reverse both. In eternity, they will be among the elite, and will enjoy rewards beyond any losses in this life. As James asks in similar context elsewhere, “Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?” (Jas 2:5).

But what does this say to us, who do not face economic discrimination for our faith, and who enjoy material prosperity? At the very least, it is a reminder to spend as much money as possibly on what counts for eternity,

rather than on what counts for this life. We want to live in such a way as to avoid being temporarily rich, but eternally poor.

Day 4: Revelation 2:9b-10a Worshippers of God or servants of Satan?

These verses, taken outside their historical context, could be distorted to justify genocide and the holocaust. That is the furthest thing from their intended purpose.

First, it is notable that this sort of language was common within first-century Judaism. Recall that Jewish leaders claimed Jesus to be possessed by Beelzebub, another name for Satan (e.g., Matt 12:22-32). Similarly, the Jewish sect of Qumran dismissed the leadership of Jerusalem as the 'temple of Belial'. In such an environment, John's 'synagogue of Satan' is not outlandish. It is, instead, an emphatic way of stating fundamental theological disagreement, a way of saying, "What you teach and practice does not bring people to God, but takes people away from God, thus serving the cause of Satan."

Secondly, John is not disparaging Judaism as a whole, or the temple in Jerusalem, but only the local synagogue for its 'slander' of Christians. The meaning of this accusation is evident from the subsequent sentence: 'the devil will put some of you [Christians] in prison'. In the first century, political authorities required all peoples to worship the emperor; all except Jews, that is. Since Christianity first took root within Judaism, so long as the political authorities saw them as a Jewish sect, they were free to abstain from emperor worship. But when the local Jewish leadership disowned Christians and reported them to the local government, they would be required to worship the emperor, under threat of persecution. Satan would use the Jewish opposition in his efforts to destroy the Church.

So this characterization arises out of the collusion of synagogue with state in the murder of Christians; it does not justify the collusion of church with state in the murder of Jews, either in ancient times or in modern.

Day 5: Revelation 2:10a Ten days of testing

John urges courage, construing the coming imprisonment as 'ten days' of 'testing'. The phrasing makes two points. First, it alludes to Daniel 1:12, where Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah underwent 'ten days' of 'testing' under a special diet regime. Seeking to speak for God into the situation facing his readers, John cites Scriptural precedent. Once before, the people of God faced pressure to worship an emperor (Daniel 3, 6). At that time, his loyal people refused, and became heroes of the faith for all time. Remember their example, John is saying to his readers, and emulate

them. More to the point, remember God's faithfulness to them, John implies; he will be faithful also to you.

This particular phrasing makes a second point. 'Ten days' is symbolic, not literal. The coming suffering will be intense, John warns, but it will also be short: just ten days, compared to eternity. A short burst of intense suffering secures eternal reputation and reward.

Once again, we find that without facing such persecution for our faith, we may not be able to lay claim to such a grand reward. Nonetheless, the exhortation – and the promise – still applies, albeit in smaller measure. During our brief time on earth, John would urge, live in such a way as to accrue an eternal reputation and reward. For us, that may not entail persecution or suffering. But it does at least entail resolute faithfulness, dedicated service, and generous giving.

Day 6: Revelation 2:10b-11 Dying in order to live

These final verses introduce a third paradox within this short passage. The eternal 'First and Last' dies and comes back to life. The impoverished are actually rich. And now: "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown." The paradox is actually two-fold: by losing, they are victorious; by dying in this life, they live through all eternity. As 1950s martyr Jim Elliot presciently wrote in his diary, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."

If nothing else, this entire passage should encourage in us a spiritual modesty. Often American Churches compare themselves with the rest of the world, and feel superior: we are wealthier, our churches are bigger, our technology more advanced, and our pastors more famous. We can afford to send money overseas, and do send a seemingly unlimited gusher of short-term missionaries and pastors to tour and bless the nations. Strikingly, the church of Smyrna did none of the things that we take pride in. They could not afford to do so: they were impoverished. They did not have the manpower to do so: they were struggling to survive. Yet they were rich, and they were on the edge of winning a spectacular victory.

If nothing else, this text should modify our value system. What matters most with God is not our wealth, the size of our churches, the advanced state of our technology, or the fame of our pastors (though none of this is bad, if genuinely and sacrificially deployed for God and on behalf of others). According to this text, what matters with God is what his people give – of their money, of their service, of their lives – for him and his mission. So the question for each of us – and for CBCGB collectively – is what are we giving for him and his mission: our surplus or our essentials?