

Letters from Heaven ~ Study 3

“Weakness Rewarded”

Revelation 2: 8-11

Introduction:

The second of the seven letters to the churches is to the Christians in Smyrna. Smyrna was another affluent and stylish city. It was perfectly planned and beautifully laid out, paved streets, porticoes, fountains, a library, gymnasiums, baths and a stadium. It also had its share of temples both to the Greek gods, including Zeus and Aphrodite, and also to the Emperor gods of the Roman Imperial cult. In fact Smyrna had successfully competed against eleven other cities for the honour of being awarded the status of the main site for the worship of Emperor Tiberius. It was beautiful and wealthy.

However, beneath the façade, there was another side to this great city, which gives some clues as to the situation the Christians of the city faced. There were tensions for them both from the Jews and from Rome. In an over-simplified nutshell, the Jews didn't like the Christians, this new-fangled sect. This was further fuelled when the Christians sought to benefit from their Jewish heritage and come under the privileged position afforded the Jews in that they alone were legally protected from having to worship the Emperor. The Jews wanted the Christians out from their synagogues, they should stand alone in the face of the Roman law. Meanwhile the Roman authorities were also very keen to determine who precisely were Jews because all Jews were subject to an extra tax, the “temple tax”. Christians found themselves ostracised from Judaism and therefore breaking the law if they refused to worship the Emperor, the penalty for which was execution.

Now read the passage

John structures all of his letters in the same way:

- ◆ Jesus says something about himself which relates back to the image of him found in chapter 1
- ◆ Jesus says that “he knows” the situation of the church to which he is writing and outlines something of that situation and responds to it
- ◆ Jesus calls the church to have ears to hear the message of the Spirit and proclaims a reward to those who overcome

Amidst this structure there seems to be one overarching theme of each letter.

1. What would you identify as the key theme of this letter to Smyrna
2. How might it have spoken to the original hearers in that city?

There seem to be many paradoxes in this passage:

- v. 8 the one who is first and last
the one who died and came to life again
- v.9 afflictions and poverty – yet rich

- v. 10 about to suffer – do not fear
point of death – crown of life
3. How do these paradoxes relate to the main theme of the letter?
 4. On a scale of 1 – 10, where 1 = fully believable and 10 = wishful thinking, where would you place each of these paradoxes?
 5. What other paradoxes and reversals can you recall enshrined in Jesus' teaching? (nb. for leaders, here's some pointers if the group need a clue – blessed are those who mourn; the first shall be last)
 6. In v.8 Jesus describes himself using paradoxes. If we believe these paradoxes in v.8, as well as those Jesus used in his teaching, to be truth, how does that affect your confidence in the paradoxes of vv. 9 and 10?

In v. 10 it seems clear that Jesus is allowing the devil to test the Christians and allowing them to be persecuted. Whether we like it or not, it seems true from this, from stories like that of Job in the Old Testament, and from our own experience, that God does allow us to be tested and suffer.

7. How does this fit with the truth that God is love?

Prayer

Take time to pray for each other.

Further note:

- ◆ v.10 The image of the crown of life may have been particularly meaningful to those from Smyrna as it has been discovered that the crown seems to have been an ancient symbol of the city. On all coins from the city pre-dating the Roman era there appears at least one image of a crown and in some cases three crowns.
- ◆ v. 10 the “ten days” may possibly connect with the practice of Christians being sent to the Roman arena for up to 10 days, although it would have been rare for people to survive more than a day; or it may be similar to the idea of death row before execution. Either way it was a period of persecution ending with death.