

Smyrna

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 January 2000

Preacher: Prof J.W.Fraser

[0 : 00] Now we return to the book of the Revelation chapter 2 and at that end. We come now to the second of the letters to the seven churches in the Roman province of Asia.

And although they were written into churches that have gone out of existence, the word still comes to us. For each message concludes with these words, he that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says unto the church.

So let me look at the second of the letters of our Lord. They were written to the church in Smyrna. Now Smyrna, our Aesir, as it is called today in modern history, lies on the free coast a few miles north of Ephesus, and unlike Ephesus, could both of a very fine harbour.

It was a city that was difficult for situations and a very salubrious place to dwell in.

It was called the Crown of Asia. An old city, its foundations were laid a thousand years before Christ.

[1 : 37] And then some 400 years later, the city was destroyed. It went dead. And we like that for the best part of 400 years, and here in 200 BC, it was rebuilt, a planned city, everything correct and as it should be.

And these points are of interest when we come to the church in Smyrna. Besides, the city was noted for its loyalty.

It was a loyal ally of the Roman Empire. On one occasion, when Rome was failing very badly in its wars with Mifredates to the east, Smyrna even sent their own clothes to club, the Roman soldiers. And the loyalty of the city is reflected in the loyalty of this lovely church in Asia. For the rest of them all, Smyrna is, in a sense, the loveliest.

The word Smyrna itself is another word for mer. And you know that mer is a sweet-smelling substance. But the fragrance of mer can only come out of its bruising.

[3 : 09] And this was a suffering church. A suffering church in the church of poverty. And out of its deep poverty, and out of its suffering, the bruising it is in, the fragrance went up into the nostrils of Christ.

And when we look at this letter, we find that our Lord has nothing to say against this church. What he says is by way of commendation.

Let's look then at the letter. First of all, noticing the descriptive introduction. Because these letters go according to a certain person's process.

There's a descriptive introduction of the written Christ. He authenticates himself, so to speak, to the church. And then there is an analysis of the church's state, together with a message to that church. And finally, there is an encouraging promise. Perhaps a warning, but an encouraging promise. In this descriptive introduction of himself, our Lord says, These things say the first and the last, which was dead and is a loss.

[4 : 37] And a description taken from the opening chapter, as we have seen, the gifts are elaborate and detailed descriptions of the risen Lord. And here he introduces himself to the church of Smyrna as the first and the last.

He who became dead and lived again. He translates the words more literally and more accurately. He who became dead and lived again.

He who became dead and lived again. And that description is not taken at random. It's fitted to the state of the church in Smyrna.

The first describes the sovereignty of the Lord of the church. I am being the first and the Lord.

The Alpha and the Omega. You know these are the two, the first letter of the rule of the Greek alphabet. Alpha and Omega the last letter.

[5 : 41] And so our Lord claims to be both the origin and the end. Christ says the beginning and the end is Christ. But more than that, in soul claiming to be the first and the last, he arrogates to himself without any presumption the attributes of true Godness.

For it is God who claims to be the first and the last. And here we see the Lord Jesus in his divine glory and power and sovereignty.

Can you imagine what that means to Smyrna? Struggling against the people of God, oppressed and persecuted with his life, life, especially with extinction.

Being snuffed out, can't fearful that it would come to an end with the fierceness of the persecution. Jesus says, fear not.

Remember I am the first and the last. It's not the enemy that has got the last word. I have the last word. And it ought to be an encouragement to us today, as we live in what is called the post-Christian age, when humanism is in control.

[7 : 07] Agnostic, atheistic, materialistic, immoral humanism. Fear not. This is the first and the last.

God. And then he describes himself as he who became dead and lived again. He who became dead and lived.

Now I want you to notice the order. He doesn't say he who lived and died. This is not a voice from the tomb or out of Hades.

This is not the voice of a medium that feats and that mutters. It is the voice of a medium that feats and that it is not the voice of a medium that feats and it comes to us from the excellent glory.

The risen Lord. The risen Lord. The risen Lord. Not the natural order, life and death. But death and life. He who died and who came alive.

[8 : 20] Lives it again. And who lives after the power of an endless life. Over whom death can never again have any power.

Or on whom death can have any place. Is that not encouraging to Smyrna? Oh yes, Smyrna is faced with death as we shall see.

Be thou faithful unto death, Jesus said. And it was no empty exhortation because Smyrna was faced with death. Fear not Smyrna.

I am he who became dead and I am alive. I live and I live forever more. And as I live, you will live also.

There then is the introduction. Let's look at the message. And the analysis our Lord gives of the church. I know thy works and tribulations and poverty, but thou art rich.

[9 : 28] Some of the best manuscripts or myths the word works. And make the passage means like this. I know thy tribulation and poverty, but thou art rich.

It may well be that that is a true reading of this verse. And it would be the true reading. Then the church in Smyrna could not be credited with much in the nature of work.

It couldn't boast of great work or of mighty deeds or of extended service. You see, it was struggling for its own existence.

The covenanters of Scotland could not boast of any great work or of mighty deeds or of great service. They couldn't engage in missionary enterprise.

Neither could the church of the Reformation in Europe. Why? Not because they were blind to it, but they were fighting for mere existence. So was Smyrna. But Jesus said, I know thy tribulation and thy poverty.

[10 : 51] But Smyrna was a church that was poor and a church that was troubled. And when our Lord says, I know, remember what we saw last day, he knows because he has got inside knowledge.

Knowledge that is not due to information. He knows not because he has been informed. He knows because he sees right through and through into the inmost heart, judging the mortems and the spirit which no human being can judge.

Man judges after the outward appearance, God judges after the heart. But my friends, when he says to Smyrna, I know thy poverty and thy tribulation, he is speaking out of experimental knowledge.

God, from his own experience, I know thy poverty, Smyrna, because I was poor.

Though with, and the words in butth here could be applied even more clearly to our Lord, but he was with, God, from his own experience.

[12 : 15] Yet for our sake he became poor, and you became so poor as our Lord Jesus Christ. When William Chalmers' burdens defects were brought home after his death in China, after an apostolic ministry there, they consisted of a chest containing the house, the plug of the houseboat in which he lived, and one of the rivers of China, and a few books and a Bible.

And the little Miss June, who was present when the trunk was opened, said, Uncle Willie must have been very poor. So he was. He was. He was. That's all he had to leave.

What would be considered junk and go as a job lot for a shilling at an auctioneer's mosque. Ah, but our Lord Jesus was poor.

He had not put it to lay his head. When he wanted a mount to ride in triumph, but Zion's king, into Jerusalem, he had to borrow the cloak, the fold of an ark.

When he required a room in which to keep the Passover over his disciples, he had to borrow the upper room from this friend, this disciple in Jerusalem. And when he required a grave in which to be laid to fulfill the scripture, he had to borrow that grave from Joseph of Adam and Eve.

[13 : 50] He had to borrow the grave from the Lord. You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though rich, yet for our sake, he became poor, poor even to the dust of death.

He was hung upon a cross. That was the measure of his poverty and deeper sins.

Oh, my friends, we cannot tell, but he can tell. And when he says, I know thy poverty, Smyrna, what sympathy there was there for that poor church.

And how poor Smyrna was, only they themselves and their Lord knew. They no doubt were poor in the world's esteem. The church in Smyrna was despised.

And the other branches of the church have known for to be despised. They say you can't be a gentleman or a lady and belong to the Free Church of Scotland. After all, they only do we breathe.

[14 : 54] And Smyrna was sworn in their own eyes. No doubt the church in Laodicea that was rich and increased in goods and in need of nothing looked down and looked at Smyrna and shook their heads and say, Oh, poor Smyrna.

Poor Smyrna. I wonder how long that church is going to last. Well, do you know Smyrna was the church, the only church in Asia that lasted any length of time.

It was where the Kansas State burned brightly longer than anywhere else. Until fairly recent times, there was a Christian church, at least a Christian church that is near, that may be today for all I know.

But I think that the church was a Christian church. And perhaps they were poor in talent. Not many mighty, not many noble, not many gifted, perhaps were found in Smyrna.

And they may have been poor in numbers. A little struggling Christian community. And in the eyes of the world, nothing succeeds like success and nothing fails like failure.

[16 : 15] Only the genuine grace of God to keep Smyrna in peace. And then there was her tribulation.

I know thy tribulation and thy poverty. And that tribulation came from a quarter that should have been an encouragement to them.

And the instigators of the trouble were the Jews. Those Jews that were quite numerous and influential in Smyrna, and who were held in high esteem by the most serious minded of the Gentile inhabitants, many of whom, if they did not become proselytes, yet followed far off the Jewish religion and practice the Jewish ethics.

Now those Jews in Smyrna hated the Christians, never missed an opportunity of stirring up the gentler rulers against them. And when that great master of Smyrna suffered death, oh fifty years and more after this letter was written, Paulicard, the Bishop of Smyrna, who was the friend of John himself who wrote this book.

And when Paulicard suffered death, the Jews were foremost in gathering the Saddam, used to burn him at the stake.

[17 : 55] I know the slander of them which say they are Jews and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan. Oh my friends, how dreadful can be the fall of a church.

Jews who belong to the church of God, and Jesus disowned them, he disinherits them, he says there are no churches, there are no attendees of mine, they're a synagogue, but not a synagogue of God, they're a synagogue of Satan.

And what was true of the Jewish church could become true of the Christian church, and did become true of the Christian church.

The church that hounded the Protestant martyrs to the stake, the church of the inquisition, the church of the auto-jafe, the fire burning for the faith in Spain, surely was no Christian church, no church of our God, but a synagogue of Satan.

The church that denies the faith, the church that is widowed with modernism, the church that blasphemes the name of Jesus, as that man in Aberdeen, Dr. Jones or whatever his name is, did, is no longer a church, it is a synagogue of Satan.

[19 : 21] I'm not referring to the church of Scotland as a whole, I'm not referring to the church of Rome as a whole, I'm just referring to a church that denies the faith, and a church that is opposed to the truth, that slanders and persecutes the people of God.

And so our Lord says to Smyrna, I know, your tribulations, and I know your promise, and in the brackets, that thou art evil.

Never did brackets contain so wonderful a statement. Our point is, on the side of your life, that's what an encouraging of some.

Our point is, poor but rich, rich in Christian courage, tribulations, workers, patience, and patience, experience.

Rich in Christian graces, in love and in loyalty, rich in faith, rich in faith, and in courage, rich too in the inheritance that lay before us, the crown of lust, the inheritance incorruptible and undefiled, and that faders not await, reserved in heaven for those who are kept by the power of God through faith, and that faders not await until salvation.

[21 : 07] You see, Smyrna was poor in the thing that Laodicea was rich in, but Smyrna was rich in the thing that Laodicea was poor in.

Thou sayest thou art rich in the increase in goods, in the need of nothing, said Jesus, who laodicea, and knowest not that thou art poor, and miserable, and blind, and naked.

To Smyrna he says I know thy poverty, but thou art rich. And great is the wealth of the inheritance of the believer.

For the Lord is a portion of his count, and his heritage for us. I wonder if we realize that. You know, I don't think that we take out the title deeds of our inheritance and look at them often enough. What I question many title deeds are, tied up with red tape and stuck in a strong box in some solicitous office.

Take out your title deeds, my Christian friend. Don't be discouraged for your own poverty.

Remember John Bunyan, in Grace Abounding, how he demoned his spiritual state one day, and felt so wexed and so miserable and so poor. He felt like one who had only got in his pocket a few cat goats and one or two broken sixpences. Poor, miserable, chicken seed of coins.

[22 : 50] And then suddenly he says, I remembered that my gold was saved in my trunk at home. And your gold is saved in your trunk at home. Your gold is in heaven, in Christ.

Jesus said, you are poor in your own eyes, in the eyes of your fellow churches, and still more poor in the eyes of the world.

But thou art which, thou art which, at the end of the day, when other witches turn to ashes, the gold fades away into dead autumn leaves, your gold will remain pure and valuable. There will be no devaluation of the currency of grace.

And then let's look at the encouragement of the Lord Jesus. Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer.

Behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried, and he shall have tribulation ten days. Now that, in the biblical language, is a short time. Not a long time, but a brief, sharp, tedious persecution.

[24 : 19] Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life. And Smyrna proved the truth of our Lord well.

Not once, but no doubt many times, when sporadic persecution broke out against the Christians because they were Christians.

Do you know? The early Christian church was persecuted simply because they professed the name of Christ. And the first time they were Christians.

All that a man had to do to qualify for capital punishment was to say, I'm a Christian. No matter how exemplary his life was, if he were a Christian, it was a capital offense.

Sometimes the Roman governor winced at him. Sometimes he was a very humane man, and he did not like to put good men to death. But sometimes his arm was twisted, twisted by those Jews and

the informer. And he had to take action, and when he did, the severity of the Roman punishment fell.

[25 : 34] The noted example is one we referred to already. Policar, the friend of John, the Bishop of Smyrna, who was burned to death in 165 AD.

And the populist, mud for blood, demanded the death of Policar, who was now 19 years old. And this man who bore the white flower of a blameless life was brought before the judge. And even the governor wanted to save his life. And those who had to carry out the Roman justice, urged him just to deny Christ. Won't you say that Caesar is God? Just say it.

Just verbally deny Jesus and give the spirit. Blaspheme, they said, blaspheme the Christ.

Blaspheme, the Fraccas' answer was, For four and six years have I served him.

And he has never done me any harm. How then can I? Blaspheme, the Can who saved me, my thing, who saved me.

[26 : 59] and the Holocaust was put in it. Fear none of these things. These days are past so far as our country is concerned.

Or are they? They are not past so far as other churches behind the arm, question are concerned. I will guarantee my friends that they have past so far as this land is concerned. The persecution of the church is the normal condition of the church. Freedom from persecution is almost abnormal for the church of Christ.

Let's thank God for the land. Let's thank God for our freedom but let's not presume upon it. We know not when the church that is rapidly becoming a malonistic and rapidly losing prestige may have to face the fire of persecution again.

Now finally, the promise. He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.

[28 : 23] That word death is a key word of this letter. It casts a kind of pall over the whole letter.

But Jesus says, don't be afraid of death. Fear not then that kill the body and after what that there is nothing that they can do.

Why that death is but a door into glory. When they stole Stephen, you remember, they looked on his face and his face was not tortured with agony.

His face was like the face of an angel. And he said, looking up I see heaven open and the Son of God standing at the right hand of God. Jesus standing there to receive him. The same it was with Polycarp. They wanted to bind him with a chain to the stake and he said, you don't need to bind me. Bring your paglets. Set the light to them. It was a case like the covenanting martyrs. Farewell, sun, moon and star. Farewell, friends. Welcome, glory.

[29 : 42] And you remember how the Marquis of Aguires, how was that mighty house fallen? The Marquis of Aguires spent his last night on earth sleeping as sweetly and as peacefully as a child.

Because his heart was sick. That sudden death or sudden glory. Ah, but, said Jeter, there's another death. There's the second death.

Now, what is the second death? That's what is called later on in this book, the Lake of Thore. What is it but hell itself? What is it but the torment and the destruction of the damned?

Oh, my friends, we ought not to be saying these things without tears in our eyes and a tremor in our voice. We're so callous. We're so hardened. We cannot feel it because we're so much children of our own age.

Of this agnostic, atheistic age that scarcely believes in a heaven and does not believe at all in a hell. Now, Jesus says, fear not them that kill the body. And after that there is nothing they can do.

[30 : 58] But I will forewarn you whom ye shall fear. Fear him who is able to cast soul and body into hell. Now, that word hell sometimes means simply the stake of the dead. Hades in our Bible.

Thou would not leave my soul in hell, the psalmist says. He didn't mean in Gehenna because it never went there. But he meant Hades or the stake of the dead. Sheol, if you like.

And sometimes that word means the hell of fire. And oh, my friends, there is the hell of fire. Where the worms dieth not and the fire is not quenched. Where you have a living death and a dying life.

And Jesus says, him that overcomes, he that overcomes shall not be hurt of the second death. He who overcomes, as believers always have overcome, by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of the Testament.

He that has an ear, let him hear what he says. So it was in Smyrna, so may it be with us. When we shall overcome the forces against us, the world, the flesh and the devil, and the devil especially.

[32 : 26] As the roaring lion going about seeking whom he may devour. Overcome him, step us in the face, by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of our Testament.

He that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says out of the churches. Let us pray. Grant us, O God, the hearing ear and the responsive will, that we may not be discouraged by any of the forces against us.

But know that thou will give grace to us, to overcome all obstacles, every temptation, and to be steadfast in the pain.

We pray for those who may be exposed, not merely to petty persecution, and pin-tricking opposition.

But who may be exposed to real persecution, to the spoiling of their goods, to the impoverishing of their estate, and above all, to the death of the body.

[33 : 52] We pray for our fellow Christians, in lands where thy church is not only despised, but condemned.

We pray for them, and we pray for them, and we pray for grace that they may be faithful, and faithful unto death. And help us, O Lord, to be loyal to our Lord and Savior.

Not ashamed to own our God, or to defend his cause. To maintain the glory of his cross, and to honor all his loss.

That's thy word to us. Remember us, each one according to our respective needs. Go thou with us, and what is left of this day. May the outgoings of the evening rejoice with those of the morning, and lift upon us the light of thy reconciled countenance in Jesus Christ, O Lord.

Amen.