

Lesson 9

Revelation 2:8-11

The Letter to Smyrna

8 And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive; **9** I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan. **10** 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 ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life. **11** He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.

Smyrna was the loveliest city in Asia. It was called the ornament of Asia, the crown of Asia, and the flower of Asia. It stood at a crossroads and was a great trading city, and its harbor was Asia's safest and most convenient.

Smyrna was a center of culture housing a large library and many famous temples. It claimed to be the birthplace of Homer.

In a sense, Smyrna had also “died and come to life” as Jesus says of himself in verse 8. Smyrna was founded in 1000 BC as a Greek colony, but it was destroyed in 600 BC by the Lydians. It was rebuilt as a planned city around 200 BC.

Smyrna is known as the persecuted church, and Christians (defined broadly) have been persecuted in Smyrna for millennia. The Great Fire of Smyrna in 1922 killed upwards of 100,000 Greek and Armenian Christians when the Turkish Muslims invaded the city. That fire in Smyrna was the closing act of an Armenian Genocide that killed 1.5 million Christians.

This was the first modern genocide, and in fact the word “genocide” was coined in 1943 to describe this massacre. The world paid little attention at the time, but it did catch the attention of Adolf Hitler. In 1939 he gave a speech in which he justified his own atrocities by asking, “Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?” The answer was no one — and that worldwide apathy led to even greater atrocities. Smyrna has a long history as a place of terrible persecution.

The “crown” promised to the faithful in verse 10 had a special connection with ancient Smyrna. The phrase “the crown of Smyrna” was very familiar to the people of Smyrna. It arose from the appearance of the hill Pagos that had many stately public buildings on its rounded top with the city of Smyrna spreading out down along its rounded sloping sides. Those buildings looked like a crown placed on top of the city.

The guardian deity of Smyrna was the Mother-goddess, Cybele. She was pictured sitting with her feet on the sea and with her head crowned with a circlet of beautiful buildings. But she had no crown of life to offer. That could come only from Christ.

Smyrna, like Ephesus, was a free city. It was self-governing and had no Roman troops.

Smyrna had a history of faithfulness — not to God, but to Rome. The city had cast its lot with Rome long before Rome became the undisputed leader of the world. Smyrna had erected a temple to the goddess Roma as far back as 195 BC. According to Cicero, the Roman feeling was that Smyrna was “the city of our most faithful and most ancient allies.”

Having a temple to the emperor was a matter of great pride to the city of Smyrna, and a refusal by any citizen of the city to pay tribute in that temple was seen as a disgraceful lack of patriotism.

We are willing to suffer for those whom we love, and the congregation at Smyrna was willing to suffer for Jesus Christ. As one commentator said: “It was a dangerous thing to be a Christian in Smyrna. There was no knowing what might happen to you.” Jesus tells them that they could expect poverty, slander, prison, and death.

The Jews in Smyrna were very influential and numerous, and verse 9 tells us they were slandering the Christians there. To receive a certificate to conduct business, you were required to burn incense on an altar to Caesar once a year. The Jews had received an exemption, but the Christians had not. The persecution against the Christians was apparently being fanned into flames by the local Jewish population, who would throw the Christians out of the synagogue and then inform on them to the local authorities.

It was in Smyrna that Polycarp was martyred. When he was commanded to “sacrifice to Caesar or be burned,” he responded, “86 years have I served Christ, and he has never done me wrong. How can I blaspheme my king who saved me?” We are told that the Jews participated in this. After Polycarp confessed that he was a Christian, we read that “the multitude of heathen and Jews living in Smyrna cried out with uncontrollable wrath,” and that they then joined (although it was the Sabbath) with the mob in gathering wood to burn Polycarp alive.

Why the increased level of antagonism against the church? Remember that Jerusalem had now been destroyed. That likely caused the remaining Jews outside of Jerusalem to close ranks against all outsiders, and especially against Jewish converts to Christianity who were likely seen as traitors to Judaism. And these same Jewish converts were teaching that God wanted the Jews to be at peace and be unified with the Gentiles who had destroyed their city. It’s not hard to see how there had been a rise in tensions.

Verse 9 begins with what must have been a very comforting phrase for the church in Smyrna to hear from Jesus — “I know.” Jesus knew their works, he knew their tribulation, he knew their poverty, and he knew who was causing them trouble. Jesus knew what was happening, and Jesus cared about what was happening to them.

Verse 9 tells us that these Christians were in poverty yet were rich. Without that certificate to conduct business that we talked about, it was very hard to find work. There are two Greek words for poverty, one that means destitution and another that means having nothing extra. The one used here means destitution. Their homes may have been plundered as well.

Hebrews 10:34 — *For ye had compassion of me in my bonds, and took joyfully the **spoiling of your goods**, knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance.*

And yet they were rich! Again, we are called upon to view the situation through God's eyes rather than through our own. We have **all** spiritual blessings in Christ Jesus.

Ephesians 1:3 — *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ.*

Who are the Jews that are not really Jews in verse 9? We find similar statements elsewhere in the Bible.

Romans 2:28-29 — *For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.*

Galatians 3:7 — *Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham.*

Here is a fact about God's people: **The Jews of that day who called themselves Jews yet were not faithful to God were no more Jews than are the Christians of today who call themselves Christians and yet are not faithful to God really Christians.** God's people are **faithful** people, or else they are not God's people no matter what they may call themselves. God's people in the Old Testament were the faithful remnant, and God's people in the New Testament are the faithful remnant.

Very strong language is used in verse 9 to describe these slandering Jews who were not really Jews. "I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan."

Synagogue of Satan? Who was the mean-spirited, divisive, unloving, hate-monger who came up with that phrase? **What do you know? It was Jesus.** And this was not the first time Jesus had used this description. Listen to what Jesus said to the Jewish leaders in John 8.

John 8:44 — *Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it.*

It doesn't sound much like Jesus thought those Jewish leaders were just on another path to salvation, does it? But that message does not go over very well in today's modern pluralistic society.

If there are many paths to salvation, then that means I can be saved apart from the blood of Christ. And if I can be saved apart from the blood of Christ, then that means Christ died for no reason. If there is a path to salvation around Jesus Christ, then his death was not necessary. What would that say about the God? What kind of God would he be if he sent his son to suffer and die for no reason? That's what we would be saying if we said there was a path to salvation that avoided Christ.

There is one way to salvation, and only one way to salvation, and we do no one any favors if we ever teach or suggest otherwise.

1 Corinthians 3:11 — *For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.*

Acts 4:12 — *Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.*

John 14:6 — *Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.*

The Bible proclaims peace between Jew and Gentile — but that peace exists in the church. It is in the church that the middle wall of partition has been broken down. For those outside of the church to come to the Father — whether they be Jew or Greek — they must find salvation in Jesus Christ. There is no other way.

The phrase “synagogue of Satan” in verse 9 is strong, but it was fitting. The Jews of that city it seems had stirred up a lot of trouble for the early Christians. Satan had been using them to hinder the work of the church.

Revelation does not apply that strong language to every synagogue. We know from the book of Acts that a lot of powerful teaching about Christ occurred in

synagogues. What that tells us is that there were some people in some synagogues who were receptive to the truth. But not, it seems, in this particular synagogue, and also, as we will see, the synagogue in Philadelphia (3:9).

Yes, there are strong words in verse 9 about this synagogue, but we should keep 1 Timothy 2:4 in mind (“who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth”) as well as 2 Peter 3:9 (“not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance”). Those verses applies to both Jew and Gentile.

When it comes to salvation and the great commission, the Gospel of Jesus Christ divides people into two groups and **only** two groups: those in Christ and those out of Christ. Galatians 3:28 could not be any clearer on this issue. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.”

God wanted peace between the Jew and the Gentile in the first century, and he still wants it today, but that peace is found only in Christ. No man cometh to the Father except by Jesus.

In verse 10 the Christians are told not to fear the things that they were about to suffer, including being cast into prison by the devil and tried. Why were they told not to fear these things? Three reasons: first, the tribulation would last only ten days, second, those who remained faithful unto death would be given a crown of life, and third, those who overcame would not be hurt by the second death. Let’s look at each of those reasons.

The first reason the Christians were told not to fear was because the tribulation would last only ten days.

This could be a literal ten days. Although these letters have some apocalyptic elements, they are for the most part not written in apocalyptic language. The cities are literal cities, the false cults are literal, the tribulations are literal — the primary vision will not begin until Chapter 4. But even here we should be looking carefully at numbers. After all, there is almost certainly a figurative reason why we have seven congregations here. Likewise, I think the ten days in verse 10 is also very likely figurative.

If ten days is figurative, then it represents a short but complete period of time. That is, it would represent a period that can be measured, a period that comes to an end. The persecution will rage for a time, but it will not be permanent. That view makes sense in the context here. But does that mean the Christians would be freed by the Romans after the period of persecution? Likely not

based on what the text says next. Yes, the persecution would end, but it would end with their physical death.

Why? Because the next thing we see is a command that they be faithful unto death, and a promise that they would not be hurt by the second death. So it looks like what happened next was that **they died** — they were executed by the Romans. If they were cast into prison and quickly executed by the Romans, then their period of tribulation would have been short, and it would have been complete in the sense that when it ended there would be no more tribulation. They would receive their crown of life and not be harmed by anything or anyone further.

The second reason the Christians were told not to fear was because those who remained faithful unto death would be given a crown of life.

***James 1:12** — Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him.*

Notice **when** that crown is received in James 1:12 — **when he is tried**, he shall receive the crown of life. Here in Revelation 1:10 the crown of life is given after death. So either the temptation or trial in James 1:12 was a trial that ended in death (a distinct possibility) or that verse is referring to our reign in life by Jesus Christ.

***Romans 5:17** — For if by one man's offence death reigned by one; much more they which receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness **shall reign in life** by one, Jesus Christ.*

Either way, we know that the faithful children of God are promised a crown of life. We see in verse 10 one of the key themes of the entire book — life versus death.

Rome was culture of death — from the warfare to the persecutions and the public fights and public executions in the Roman colosseum, Rome wallowed in death. In that sense, Rome has much in common with our own culture, and increasingly so. Not just the mass killings that are becoming commonplace, but the celebration of death we see from Hollywood, the abortion industry that kills 3000 unborn children in this country every day, and the violent video games we use to introduce our children to the culture of death. We also wallow in death.

If you are discussing this problem with your friends, at this point someone will likely trot out some statistics purporting to show no link between real-life violence and violent video games. Here's an example you can give them. At a Paducah, Kentucky, school a few years ago, 14 year-old Michael Carneal stole a gun from a neighbor's house, brought it to school, and fired eight shots into a student prayer meeting that was just breaking up. **Prior to stealing the gun, he had never shot a real handgun in his life.** The FBI says that the average experienced law enforcement officer, in the average shoot-out, at an average range of seven yards, hits with approximately one bullet in five. So how many hits did Michael Carneal make? He fired eight shots; he got eight hits, on eight different kids. Five of them were head shots, and the other three were upper torso. The result was three dead and one paralyzed for life. How did Michael Carneal acquire that kind of killing ability? Practice. He had killed thousands of people in the video games he played every day.

Much has been said about how ancient Rome compares with the United States, and some of the comparisons are fair and some are not. But one comparison that is very fair is that we share Rome's fascination with blood and death. And that has come upon us quickly. We see things every day on the TV that we would never have dreamed of seeing just a few decades ago, and what our kids see in their video games is much much worse. We are swimming in blood, as was Rome, and we are becoming accustomed to it, as did Rome. And we should pause to consider the judgment that God brought upon Rome for its lust for blood — more blood! Before this book is over we will see Rome swimming in a river of blood.

We live in a culture of death — but Jesus is all about life, and as his children we should also be all about life. Yes, we each have an appointment with death, but the gospel is a message of life — eternal life — and a promise of a crown of life. We must continue to proclaim that message of life loudly in the culture of death that surrounds us.

The third reason the Christians were told not to fear was because those who overcame would not be hurt by the second death. We will have more to say about the second death when we get to Chapter 20, but one thing is certain: Rome's power over a person ended with the death of that person. Not so with Jesus' power over Rome!

Those who overcome — that is, those who remain faithful unto death — their death is the end of their trials and tribulations. They will not be hurt by anything that follows their physical death. That is the promise in these verses, but

that is not a promise for Rome. For those outside of Christ, their problems do not *end* at death — they *begin* at death!

And verse 11 confirms that this letter to the church at Smyrna is not a letter to only the church in Smyrna — Jesus says, “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches” (plural). Jesus is speaking here to Smyrna in particular, and to the seven churches of Asia Minor, but Jesus’ message is for the entire church — that is why we have these letters in the inspired text. These promises are for us as well.

Verse 9 includes two short phrases that are perfect illustrations of the theme of the entire book of Revelation. The first is the parenthetical phrase “but thou are rich” after the word “poverty.” The second is the phrase “which say they are Jews, and are not.”

The Jews said they were Jews, but they were not. Likewise, those same Jews told the Romans that the Christians who said they were Jews were not Jews. Those Christians identified with the Jews so that they could enjoy protection under the exemptions granted by Rome to the Jews, but the Jews told the Romans that the Christians were not Jews. Here, Jesus says the same thing to the Jews.

Each of those phrases (“but thou are rich” and “they say they are Jews and are not”) is included here to make the same point — **things are not what they seem!**

The Christians were not seeing themselves correctly, and the Jews were not seeing themselves correctly. They had one view of themselves, but God had a different view — and God’s view is always the correct view! If we want to see things as they really are then we need to see them with spiritual eyes; we need to see them as God sees them.

It is like what we see in the book of Ecclesiastes. When viewed only from the perspective of someone under the sun, this world looks one way — but when that person lifts his eyes and tries to see things from God’s perspective, from a spiritual rather than physical perspective, things look entirely different. That theme from Ecclesiastes runs all throughout this book of Revelation — we see two examples of it right here in verse 9.

And what theme could be more vital than that in our own present world? Perhaps at no time in history has secular materialism been more pervasive and powerful than today. We in the church must never give in to that false worldview.

Colossians 3:1-4 — *If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory.*

Those four verses from Colossians 3 are a manifesto against all that our culture promotes. Those four verses are telling us to lift up our eyes — and so is the entire book of Revelation!

2 Corinthians 4:18 — *While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.*

The central challenge of Revelation is to look at things not seen. Not things that are *unseeable*, but rather things that are not being seen — but that are capable of being seen (otherwise how could we be commanded to look at them?). Why aren't they being seen? Because they can't be seen with secular materialistic eyes. They can be seen only with spiritual eyes.

1 Corinthians 2:14 — *But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.*

Ephesians 1:17-18 — *That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him: The eyes of your understanding being enlightened.*

This eyesight problem is a problem that runs all throughout the Bible, but nowhere more so than in the gospel accounts. It is a problem that Jesus dealt with daily.

When a man looked at Jesus, whom did he see? The Son of God, or an imposter? It depended on that man's eyes. If he saw Jesus with spiritual eyes, looking at Jesus through the eyes of prophecy and through eyes that saw the mighty works of Jesus, then he saw the Son of God. But if he looked at Jesus with only

natural eyes, then he saw something quite different — and many saw Jesus that way.

What was the unforgivable sin — blasphemy against the Holy Spirit? Mark tells us what it was.

Mark 3:29-30 — *But he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation: **Because they said, He hath an unclean spirit.***

That terrible sin was committed when someone's eyes were so corrupt that that person could look upon the Son of God come in the flesh and see instead someone with an unclean spirit. No sin, it seems, could be worse!

How often did Jesus' miracles involve opening the eyes of the blind! Jesus came to open everyone's eyes! Just think about how often Jesus talked about eyesight!

Matthew 6:22-23 — ***The light of the body is the eye:** if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!*

Matthew 13:15-16 — *For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them. **But blessed are your eyes, for they see:** and your ears, for they hear.*

Matthew 15:14 — *Let them alone: **they be blind leaders of the blind.** And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch.*

Mark 8:18 — ***Having eyes, see ye not?** and having ears, hear ye not? and do ye not remember?*

Luke 10:23-24 — *And he turned him unto his disciples, and said privately, **Blessed are the eyes which see the things that ye see: For I tell you, that many prophets and kings have desired to see those things***

which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them.

We must see things with spiritual eyes. We must see *ourselves* that way. We must see *other people* that way. We must see *the world* that way. We must see *the church* that way. We must see *Jesus* that way. “The light of the body is the eye.”

To understand the book of Revelation we must see things as God sees them, and the book of Revelation itself will help us do that. The theme of Revelation is that things are not what they seem! If we can view things as God sees them, then, and only then, will see those things as they really are.

Rome looks invincible. Is that how God sees Rome? The church looks powerless. Is that how God sees the church? Our situation looks hopeless. Is that how God sees our situation?

We will face some real challenges in our efforts to understand this book, but when faced with such challenges we should always try to see things as God sees them. And how do we do that? We read God’s word. That is how we see things as God sees them.

Let’s look at an example of how that will help us in our study. We have already talked about the judgment of Rome, and we will have much more to say about that judgment as we proceed through the book. But let’s ask this question now — what sort of judgment should we expect when it comes to the judgment of Rome? Will it be like Sodom and Gomorrah, where literal fire fell down from heaven? Will it be like Jerusalem, where armies surrounded and destroyed the city? Not necessarily.

But, someone says, look at the language in this book describing that judgment of Rome: “hail and fire mingled with blood, a great mountain burning with fire cast into the sea, the third part of the sea becoming like blood” (8:7-8), and we could go on and on. Shouldn’t we expect a divine fireball falling from the sky in the first century to obliterate the city and vindicate the saints? Again, not necessarily.

That vivid language about fire mingled with blood is describing for us how God views the judgment of Rome — how it would look from a spiritual perspective, and how the persecuted Christians should see it — but the view of that judgment with natural undiscerning eyes might look very different.

How do we know that such is a possibility? We know that from how a prior judgment was described — the judgment of Babylon by God at the hands of

the Medes and the Persians. First, let's look at how that judgment was described by Isaiah, writing about 160 years before it happened.

Isaiah 13:17-22 — Behold, I will stir up the Medes against them, which shall not regard silver; and as for gold, they shall not delight in it. Their bows also shall dash the young men to pieces; and they shall have no pity on the fruit of the womb; their eye shall not spare children. And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldees' excellency, shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah. It shall never be inhabited, neither shall it be dwelt in from generation to generation: neither shall the Arabian pitch tent there; neither shall the shepherds make their fold there. But wild beasts of the desert shall lie there; and their houses shall be full of doleful creatures; and owls shall dwell there, and satyrs shall dance there. And the wild beasts of the islands shall cry in their desolate houses, and dragons in their pleasant palaces: and her time is near to come, and her days shall not be prolonged.

After reading that vivid description of Babylon's judgment, we might think that the Medes did to Babylon what the Romans did to Jerusalem — obliterate it — but that is not at all what happened. We have already studied that event in our earlier series of lessons on the book of Daniel. As you recall, Daniel describes what happened in two short verses.

Daniel 5:30-31 — In that night was Belshazzar the king of the Chaldeans slain. And Darius the Median took the kingdom, being about threescore and two years old.

The Medes and the Persians took the city of Babylon without firing a shot. The city was not destroyed, and the walls were not torn down. The people were not slaughtered, but rather many of them were happy with the change, most likely opening the gates to the invading army while Belshazzar drank the night away.

And yet — **and here is the crucial point** — the power of the Chaldeans in Babylon was utterly broken. They and their city were judged just as God had foretold through Isaiah and through Daniel. Babylon had fallen!

And that great fall was described using vivid apocalyptic language. God saw them as a desolation because that is what they were — an utter desolation. They had been weighed and found wanting, so God judged them and removed them. Belshazzar did not live out the night.

But shouldn't we take Isaiah 13 literally? No, we shouldn't, and, in fact, we can't. Verse 22 says that it would occur **soon**, and verse 20 says the city would never be inhabited again. That did not literally occur soon after the Isaiah, and, in fact, has not to this day literally occurred.

Common sense tells us that the prophecy **cannot** be taken literally — if the wild animals of Isaiah 13:21-22 can inhabit the area, what would prevent people from pitching tents there? The language is apocalyptic and figurative — the same type of language we have seen with other judgments in the Bible.

Well, what about Rome? How was Rome judged? Let's wait a bit on that question, but when we get there, let's remember this example from Isaiah 13, and let's remember to view that judgment through spiritually discerning eyes.