

## Revelation 2:8 – Church of Smyrna

### Revelation 2:8-11

<sup>8</sup> “And to the angel of the church of Smyrna write: The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. <sup>9</sup> “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. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> 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.



The locations of the seven churches are pretty close to each other. If you go to Turkey today, you can visit all these places.

### Look at the 7 churches as One Church

If we look at the seven churches as a whole, we can see aspects of what constitutes the Church of God. If we take heed of all the warnings and imitate the positive examples, we can perceive the true Church of God. Some scholars see the seven letters as the foundation of the book of Revelation. In other words, the book of Revelation is telling us the types of people who will endure to the end. So when we study each letter, we are not to regard them separately.

For example, last week, in the letter to the church in Ephesus, the primary element was total love for God. In other words, that first love is very important and is the foundation of our spiritual life. It is, in fact, the fulfillment of the first commandment, the Shema. Now, in connection to the present passage, if we don't have the first love for God and Jesus, how then will we lay down our lives? So that is the big question.

### The background: Smyrneans are loyal to and worship the emperor

Smyrna was an important center for emperor worship. There are, of course, Greek and Roman gods who are also important to them. But the emperor cult is significant because they want to express their loyalty to Rome. The scholars tell us that their loyalty to Rome is in the extreme. They use words like “extreme commitment to Rome.” That is how much they love the emperor. Speaking of commitment, the contrast for the followers of Jesus is their loyalty to Jesus. Therefore there existed only two loyalties; we do not see any in-betweens. When you speak to the Smyrneans about commitment, they know what it meant.

There was a story that took place in Smyrna. During an unusually cold winter around AD 130, the Roman soldiers there were suffering under this weather. Do you know what the citizens did? Those who saw the Romans soldiers shivering took off their outer garments and gave them to the soldiers. They would rather experience the cold themselves than allow the Roman soldiers to suffer in this way. You can see their love and concern for the soldiers, to the extent that they are willing to sacrifice what they have for their sakes.

The Roman emperor, on the other hand, would want to reward them for their loyalty. As a result, they benefitted quite a lot from the emperor's generosity. Here is the challenge when you go to places where people are very loyal to their government because the government takes care of them and ensures they have a high standard of living. If you are going to preach the gospel to them, they have to see that Jesus is greater than the emperor. What then is there to show? That's the question! In the case of the church in Laodicea, they are so rich that they are very contented already and do not see their spiritual need. There is a problem with reaching out to people who have a good life with the gospel of Christ. They might not respond at all. Most likely, it is the poor who know their needs, who will respond.

### **Christianity is illegal in the eyes of the Roman government**

Those who are committed to Jesus are, in fact, in a very volatile position. At that time, only the Jews were legally allowed to practice their religion in the Roman Empire and were exempt from worshipping the emperor and the gods. The Roman government recognizes that Judaism is a very old religion.

On top of that, I mentioned last week there were trade guilds or unions. Since the Jews would not bow their knees to other gods, they created their own trade guilds and were doing very well. As a result, they were able to co-exist with their Gentile neighbors.

When Christianity started, the Jewish disciples were exempted because the government thought they were part of Judaism. Later, the Jews turned against the disciples and informed the authorities that they were not Jews and do not belong to the synagogue. The moment they separated the disciples from the synagogue, the disciples have no more protection. The Roman government designated them illegal. It is illegal to belong to Jesus! It is a very dangerous thing to follow Jesus.

Those of us who grew up in Malaysia 40 to 50 years ago have a small taste of this. It doesn't matter what religious background you are from or what race. Whether a person comes from a Chinese family that prays to Chinese gods, or Hindus who pray to the Hindu gods, or Malays who are Muslims, it is a very high price to pay if they become a Christian. I don't know what it is like today because Malaysia is getting increasingly Westernized. But in those days, it can trigger a hostile reaction. I know of a Sikh guy whom the family disowned after he had become a Christian!

### **Two kinds of glory**

That's what Jesus said to his disciples, "They will make you outcasts," and that is precisely what we are looking at when we come to Revelation. Now, unless we experience who Jesus is and see his glory, which comes from God, we begin to understand that the glories of this world are slowly passing away. So we are challenged with two kinds of glory. It is the glory of this world which we are familiar with. I don't need to explain this part; just think of the best that the US or Canada offers us. But that's what many Christians are already pursuing.

### **Without contact with Jesus and Yahweh, the comparison is lost**

But when it comes to the glory of Christ, do we see the glory? That's why it forces us into a direct encounter with Jesus. If we don't experience who Jesus is, there is no comparison to make. There isn't

an alternative, and that is why a lot of so-called Christians still love the world. They claim to be Christians, and they thought they were Christians, but there is no direct relationship, no contact with Jesus. So intellectually, we would like to experience Jesus, but in reality, our vision is still of this world; we know of no other. The world is more real to us than the spiritual realm, than the things of God.

So when Jesus is addressing the church in Smyrna and reminds them to be faithful unto death, you have to understand what is assumed right there. They had in-depth spiritual experiences so that knowing Jesus and, as a result, Yahweh Himself, is worth much more than anything else in this world. It is a very big challenge for us living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I have found that many people were willing to go for baptism and yet have no experience. It shows that something is still wrong and their spiritual foundation is not in order. As a non-Christian, my thought was if I don't experience who Jesus is, I shouldn't call myself a Christian. I came from an idolatrous background, and I could experience the reality of these idols. So don't think they are just wood or stone or whatever. They are alive! So if I were to turn to Jesus, I needed to know his reality. Now, these are important principles to grasp. We are not talking about laying down our lives yet. We are even not talking about suffering. We are just talking about the beginning of the Christian life.

### **The present sufferings now are not worth comparing with the glory that is to come**

#### **Romans 8:18**

*For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.*

Paul says he *considers the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is revealed to us*. Now notice what Paul does not say. He did not say, "I consider the pleasures of this life or the good life are not worth comparing with the glory that is revealed to us." He said the sufferings.

Now think for a moment: since when is suffering worth anything? For us, the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with our ordinary life. We don't have to rich. Even if we are in the low-income group, at least we are not suffering. Every day we can live a relatively comfortable life. We could say, "The sufferings of this present time are not worth compared to my simple life."

So we need to ask Paul, "What's wrong with you? Why did you even use suffering to compare with other things?" I think we have to pause and ponder over this matter. Why did Paul put it this way? It is because he considers the sufferings in this world (that is, for the sake of the gospel) are at least worth something. I mentioned "the glory of Rome" versus "the glory of Christ." Now we recognize that that is a comparison, but Paul is not even considering the glory of this world. He ranks the suffering in this present time higher than the glory of this world. So for Paul, the glory of this world is worth nothing but the sufferings of this time are at least worth something. However, it is still not worthy to be compared to the glory that is to come.

## **Moses regards suffering for Yahweh's sake is worth much more than Egypt**

### **Hebrews 11:25-26**

<sup>25</sup>*choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.* <sup>26</sup>*He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward.*

This verse refers to Moses. He chose rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. Notice "the mistreatment" is worth more than the pleasures of sin. Then verse 26 "*the reproach of Christ has greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt.*" What is the mistreatment? What is the reproach of Christ that Moses wanted to experience? Well, it is the suffering that results in doing what is right. In other words, the suffering for righteousness itself is worth something.

That's what Paul is thinking. Every time he was beaten or slandered, he rejoices because he is standing firm in what Jesus himself values. When we stand for God's righteousness and justice, for what is right in God's sight, that has spiritual value. It strengthens our faith. It increases our spiritual strength. It also gives us power against sin.

So never be afraid when your friend or family member speaks against you. For those who are at the age of maturity, maybe your parents might object if you want to become a Christian. Those are not life-threatening, unlike what we read in Revelation 2. It's just people objecting, or they insult you or make fun of you. Those are the kinds we experience today in North America.

Now in other places, it is much worse. They get imprisoned, they get beaten up. They get tortured. For them then, Revelation 2:10 would mean quite a lot. But for us, we generally don't have much of an experience of persecution because, in Canada, Christianity is legal. We have our rights and are protected by the Constitution. Persecution is non-existent in most cases unless we want to include that word, the bad things that people say about us. Or maybe we lose some friends. The fact is, our experience of suffering is quite minimal.

So we are left to imagine. A few weeks ago, when I was sitting on the dentist's chair, the dentist said, "Here's the marvel of modern medicine." He gave me anesthesia. "This one," he said, "works wonders." So he started drilling, and I don't feel anything. As I was sitting there, I remembered a British soldier who was a prisoner of war somewhere in the Middle East. They tortured him with a dentist drill, drilling all his teeth. Well, I must admire his courage. He was able to take the pain. So I had to imagine. I did not experience any physical torture for the sake of Christ. I experienced being spoken against or threatened, but never got beaten up.

So you can see right here, Moses regarded the suffering for God's sake, for what is right in God's sight as greater riches. That means he stood with the people of God, loved them, and helped them. That is worth more than sins and the treasures of Egypt. But Paul said, when the glory of God is revealed in its fullness, that is worth much more than the sufferings in this present life.

### **The ten days in Revelation 2:10**

In Revelation 2:10, they would be in prison for ten days. That ten days represent a short time. But it is not that they are sentenced to prison for a short time only to return to their normal lives again. The Lord Jesus goes on to say, "Be faithful unto death." So then, the time in prison is not a prison sentence. It is simply a holding cell or a place where they are held until the trial comes. In the meantime, they will use their tools of persuasion to make them change their mind. When I say "tools of persuasion," it simply means they would torture them. After that, the trial will take place. The trial is a simple one: they will be told to renounce their faith or deny Christ. If they don't do that, they will be executed straight away. The ten days would translate to a short time of torture and hardship (tribulation). Subsequently, they would meet their death. That's basically what we are looking at when we understand the background.

### **Is it really worth it, to live and die for Christ?**

In other words, we have to ask this question: is living and dying for Christ really worth it? Do you find that continuing our faith in and our walk with the Lord is truly of great worth? We certainly don't want to end up denying the Lord. If we do that, in the end, we lose everything, especially our eternal wellbeing.

Now in this world, there are quite a lot of people who are ready to die for a cause. They have their ideology. A couple of weeks ago, there was an interview in the news. This guy loudly proclaimed, "I am ready to die for Trump." Wow! He loves Donald Trump that much, and Trump is worth this man's life. This kind of allegiance is not something new. When I was teaching in China, a student said in class, "I am ready to die for China. If my country is threatened at any time, I am ready to die." Many people are ready to die for their country or for someone they admire. But I find it rather strange. The person you want to die for, does that person know you? You are willing to die for someone who doesn't know you. If I fight for my country, I am pretty sure the Prime Minister doesn't know me. Let's say I am a young man, and I fight for my country. Maybe at the end of the battle, they find my dead body and got my name. My government only knows me by name. That's all. Still, they don't know me!

That is why I find it strange: you are willing to die for someone or a cause, yet the person or the founder of the ideology or the country's leader does not know you. We have a strange mentality. Even soccer fans fight with one another for their team. We see this in England, for example. They are willing to be stabbed for a team that does not know them at all! Even the owners of the club don't know them!

### **If we have a relationship with God, He knows us**

I hope we understand that when we die for him, it is borne out of a close fellowship with Jesus. He knows us through and through. He recognizes and honors our loyalty and our faith in him. That is why Paul says the glory that is to be revealed. He is talking about a very intimate relationship with God, where there is no more hindrance. There is nothing to block the view. He can enter into the bosom of God. Jesus says, "I give you the crown of life." That life is the life of God. Jesus sees the joy that is set before him; he can see the Father in full view as well as the glory of his purpose for the Church. That is why he endured the cross.

So if you are ready to lay down our lives, it is not because we love the Christian ideology. If it is an ideology, it is useless. Rather, it is a relationship, and in this relationship, we are not motivated by hate. We are not going to kill anyone. We are motivated by the love of God. So we are back to our first love again.

I hope we grasp all these. The remaining time, I would like to look at yet one more verse.

### **Synagogue of Satan**

#### **John 8:44**

*You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.*

Jesus says these are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Now the word "synagogue" and "church" shares the same meaning because both mean a gathering or an assembly. So you could replace synagogue with church, "Those who call themselves Christians and are not but are a church of Satan."

It doesn't mean that they are Satanists, that they worship Satan in church or synagogue. They continue to identify themselves either as Jews or followers of Jesus, but by their actions they prove to be Satan's servants. This is where John 8:44 comes in. Jesus is speaking to the religious leaders, especially the Pharisees. Their father is the devil because "your will is to do your father's desires."

#### **The devil's desire – Cancel out the gospel's truth**

For our purpose, what is "your father's desire" or the devil's desire? It is very simple. The whole focus is to cancel out the truth and integrity of the gospel, as we will see in the next 2 churches. When you listen to the true gospel, it is never easy to grasp. Many people cannot accept it and, in fact, find it offensive. So what is the devil's desire? Simply change the message. Remove discipleship out of it. Make Christianity easy to believe, so all you have to do is to accept Jesus, and you go to heaven. Don't talk about "be faithful unto death." Ah! That's very bad. Nobody will become Christians after that. Don't talk about first love. We have to be practical. There are a lot of things we have to take care of.

That is why you hear this familiar talk, "It is okay to go to church but do not become too extreme, too dedicated." That is the kind of thing we often hear. That is because we don't see what the truth of the gospel is. That is how Satan blinds us. Change the message of the gospel. Make it easy for everyone because he knows that when we do that, we will not live. We become a church of Satan because now we propagate and continue to preach his message. So please understand all these clearly.

#### **John 8:39, 41**

<sup>39</sup>*They answered him, "Abraham is our father". Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did.*

<sup>41</sup>*You are doing the works your father did. They said to him, "We are not born of sexual immorality. **We have one Father – even God.**"*

The Jews claim that Abraham is their father and that their Father is God. They are very certain that they are people of God. But Jesus said, "No! Your father is the devil." So you have people like this in Smyrna. Now the scholars are arguing, "Are these real Jews who are rejecting the Christians? Or are they false Christians rejecting the true Christians?" It doesn't really matter because as I said, the basic meaning of synagogue and church is the same.

### **Do you love the truth and receive it?**

Now the only way we can survive the spiritual battle is to learn this important truth.

### **2 Thessalonians 2:9-10**

<sup>9</sup>*that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, <sup>10</sup>and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved.*

In the last days before the Lord Jesus comes, this person comes with Satan's activity. He's some kind of Christian who works with all power, signs, and false wonders. Why are the people deceived by him? And Paul tells us why, "because they did not receive the love of the truth."

Then you might say, "I don't know the truth because nobody taught me the truth." So how do I receive something when I am not told what it is? Now to argue like this is to be ignorant of the Bible. Here the Lord Jesus makes it clear.

### **You have to initiate and take an active role**

#### **Matthew 7:7-8**

<sup>7</sup>*"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. <sup>8</sup>For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.*

Ask! You have to keep asking, and it will be given to you. You have to keep seeking, and you will find. If you keep knocking, it will be opened to you. This is a fundamental principle that ensures our spiritual survival. If you do not want to pursue the truth, you will never know the truth.

In other words, 2 Thessalonians 2 is never passive. We have to take an active role. So how do you receive the love of the truth? When you are active in asking God, seeking Him, and knocking at His door. We must take the initiative to look for Him and be responsive to Him. The truth is, God is always the One who takes the initiative so that our actions are, in fact, based on His initiative. Keep responding, and that is how you will find and receive. Seek diligently, and Yahweh will reveal to you His truth in Christ Jesus.

### **Three topics in the Old Testament that are most frequently quoted in the New Testament**

When you read the letters to the seven churches, we see the familiar refrain, “He who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” Jesus is rephrasing the Old Testament positively or actively.

I have checked the number of verses in the Old Testament concerning a particular topic that the New Testament speaks about quite often. The most common group of verses from the Old Testament has to do with the love command, and they occur about 30 times in the New. In other words, the love command is the most important in the New Testament.

The second and the third share the same frequency, that is, 13 times. The second has to do with Yahweh-centeredness, those verses that direct one’s attention to Yahweh. The third group of verses concerns spiritual blindness.

### **Isaiah 6:9-10**

*<sup>9</sup>And he said, “Go, and say to this people: ‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive’. <sup>10</sup>Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes, lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.*

This verse keeps coming across in the New Testament. The authors are applying this crucial verse to the hearers to warn them about spiritual blindness. Seven times in Revelation 2 and 3, our Lord Jesus converted Isaiah 6:9,10 into a positive statement. The latter is negative: *keep on hearing but don’t understand, see and not perceive because their ears have become heavy and their eyes are blind*. So, we have to hear and discern the truth by active pursuit in accordance with Matthew 7:7,8. Otherwise, like the people, whether Jew or Gentile in Roman Asia or the government officials, we too will turn against the gospel. Even the people of God, or so they claim to be, can turn against Jesus.

### **An example of a man who was regarded as a man of God, ended up serving Satan’s will**

In closing, I would like to talk about this well-known pastor who was in the news yesterday.

#### **Report: Ravi Zacharias Engaged in Sexual Abuse**

February 12, 2021 | [Joe Carter](#)

Zacharias used religious expressions to gain compliance, as she was raised to be a person of faith. She reported that he made her pray with him to thank God for the “opportunity” they both received. She said he called her his “reward” for living a life of service to God, and he referenced the “godly men” in the Bible with more than one wife. She said he warned her not ever to speak out against him or she would be responsible for the “millions of souls” whose salvation would be lost if his reputation was damaged.

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/report-ravi-zacharias-sexual-abuse/>



Most of us know about this person because he is very well-known internationally. He died last year. Last year, there were already some complaints of a sexual nature about him. Since then, an investigation has been going on, and it has to do with his cell-phone messages that he had sent to several women. He was counseling a married woman and somehow managed to win her confidence. It was then that he told her to send him a nude picture of herself, and she did so. The investigator eventually found out she was not the only one. There were a lot more whom Ravi was exploiting to satisfy his sexual desire. He was fond of women masseuses and had sex with some of them.

We have here on this slide about that married woman he was counseling and was able to capture her heart. You can see what happens when this person uses the Bible and spiritual reasons to justify his sexual lust. It is clear that this person is not of God and, at that point, was serving Satan.

When we read John 8:44, we are not talking about people who are committing this kind of sin. No Pharisee would go to that extent. That's why Jesus said, "Unless your righteousness exceeds those of the Pharisees, you will not enter the Kingdom (Matthew 5:20)." But here you have somebody who was a church leader and was thought to be a genuine man of God. He was, in fact, worse than the Pharisee. If given the Pharisee's righteousness, he remains a son of the devil, then may Yahweh have mercy upon us all, on the Church today.

At first, when this matter came up, I thought, "Well, what's new?" But when you read that website I have given you, you will discover more dreadful things. That is when we fear and tremble! They found pictures of more than 200 women on his cell-phone, some of whom were semi-nude. Before he died, he swore that he had never slept with any other woman except his wife. So he claimed before he died. After he died, all these matters came up. In other words, he died without repentance, not just of his sexual sins but also his lies. May God have mercy!

So the lesson for all of us is to understand that as servants of God, we have to maintain our relationship with Yahweh and with His Christ and not end up in the devil's hand.