

Rev, 2:8-11, Smyrna, the Resurrection Church

Easter 2008

Introduction

Last year we saw how the Lord introduced himself in Rev 1 with an emphasis on the resurrection.

The description of the Lord in Rev 1 forms the context for the letters to the churches in ch. 2-3. Each letter refers to some aspect of the description. One church, Smyrna, is reminded that the Lord is the risen one. So we will then turn to the letter to Smyrna to see how the resurrection of the Lord encouraged them, and how it should encourage us.

1:4-6, 17-18, The Resurrection Introduces the Lord Jesus

The Lord is introduced twice in ch. 1.

First, John describes him in the blessing with which he opens the book, following the same pattern that Paul uses in his epistles.

Second, he reports how after the Lord appeared to him on the Lord's day, the Lord introduced himself.

The Lord's resurrection is prominent in both of these introductions. In the first, he is called "the first begotten of the dead," emphasizing that his resurrection is the first of many. We studied this phrase last Christmas. Because he rose, we can look forward to resurrection. This notion that we will share his resurrection is at the heart of his encouragement of the church at Smyrna.

After the introduction, John reports how he saw a vision of the exalted Lord. He is overwhelmed at the sight.

17 Fear not.--The Lord moves immediately to comfort him, and this comfort contains the second reference to the resurrection, the one that is most prominent in the letter to Smyrna.

He goes on to say four things that emphasize why John should not fear. Each is marked by a finite verb.

I am the first and the last, and the living one.--We should associate the first three words of v.18 in Greek (lit. "and the living-one") with v. 17, since they have no verb of their own. (Note AV's italics.)

The KJV division recalls the similar English titles in Isaiah's descriptions of the Lord (44:6; 48:12; 41:4). But in Greek they are not the same. "First and last" here is not a reference to Jesus' eternal existence. Rather, the phrase echoes a common statement of the Lord in the gospels:

Matt 19:30 But many *that are* first shall be last; and the last *shall be* first.

Matt 20:16 So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.

Mark 9:35 And he sat down, and called the twelve, and saith unto them, If any man desire to be first, *the same* shall be last of all, and servant of all.

Mark 10:31 But many *that are* first shall be last; and the last first.

Luke 13:30 there are last which shall be first, and there are first which shall be last.

The Lord is referring, not to his eternal nature as God, but to his humiliation and exaltation as man. The

words refer to status, not to time. As man, he is the first, the highest ranked of all creation—but also the last, who took the very lowest place when he bore our sin to the tree, of whom David spoke prophetically in Ps 22:6, “I am a worm, and no man.” The title “first and last” is the verbal counterpart of the vision of ch. 5, “the lamb that was slain.”

The third title, “the living one,” points to his resurrection, by which he has been elevated from his wormlike condition and given the name above every name, YHWH, the self-existent one.

18 I was dead.--Literally, “I became dead.” His second self-description flows from the first. He is explaining how it is that such a glorious person could describe himself as “the last.” It is because he became dead.

The verb emphasizes the process, not just the state. His humiliation consists not just in his being dead, but in his taking on death because of our sin. The scriptures teach that “Christ died for our sins,” not that he was dead for our sins.

behold, I am alive for evermore.--His third self-description again flows from the first, this time from the title, “the living one.”

2:8-11, The Resurrection Encourages the Church at Smyrna

Each of the letters has a standard outline, usually including both warning about their shortcomings and encouragement for what is right. Smyrna, along with Philadephia, have no warnings, only praise.

8a, Address to Smyrna

The emphasis throughout the letter is on the paradox of how one can die and yet live. Historically, the city disappeared as a city for three centuries (600-290 BC). It was conquered by Lydia in 600, then destroyed by the Persians in 545, and its citizens were dispersed in small villages. But Alexander the Great refounded it in 300, an instance of urban resurrection. Unlike Ephesus, Smyrna continues to this day as Izmir, one of the largest cities of Turkey. Still retains a (nominally) Christian population; the city of my Armenian ancestors.

8b, Description of the Lord, from 1:17,18.

Each of the seven letters reaches back to ch. 1, showing how the Lord, there revealed, is present with his people.

First and last.--Emphasizes our Lord's willingness to be humbled in his obedience to the Father. So faithful Christians must be willing to endure hardness for the sake of the Lord Jesus.

Dead and lived.--His humiliation took the form of death, yet that did not conquer his life. He lived on.

- When he expired on Calvary, he committed his spirit to the Father, and was instantly with him.
- After three days, he reentered his body and resumed physical life.

The importance of this description to Smyrna is that they are facing persecution "unto death." Our Lord's example, of enduring suffering and humiliation while trusting in the Father's ability to raise him from the dead, becomes our example for facing hardship.

9, Commendation

I know thy works.--Each of the letters begins with this assurance. People often speak of their salvation as “coming to know the Lord,” but it is far more striking to contemplate that he knows us, as Paul writes in Gal 4:9, “But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God....”

The Lord describes three specific things that he knows about them.

Thy tribulation.--Today, Christians use this term mostly to describe the events of the last days. But most times in the NT (37/45) it refers to present trials for the child of God, not to a future time of judgment for unbelievers. Our comfort is not that we shall escape tribulation, but that the Lord knows and controls it. He will not suffer us to be tempted above that we are able (1 Cor 10:13).

Thy poverty (but thou art rich).--In the world's eyes, they were not well-off. They may have belonged to a lower social class in the first place, since the lower classes were more open to the gospel (cf. James 2:5, “God hath chosen the poor of this world rich in faith). Or they may have been impoverished by the persecution they had endured.

Yet the Lord reminds them of their spiritual riches, echoing the Sermon on the Mount,

Matt 6:19-21 Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: 20 But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: 21 For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

Because he was willing to be “the last,” so must we not cling to the world's prestige. We must learn to treasure that which the Lord values.

them which say they are Jews,--As throughout the book of Acts (13:50 in Antioch, 14:2 in Iconium, 17:3 in Berea), the persecution against the believers was led by converts to Judaism.

and are not.--Their adversaries, while following the Jewish law, fall short of the essential qualification, as identified by Paul:

Rom 2:28-29 For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither *is that* circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: 29 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.

Cf. Rom. 9:6, “they are not all Israel, which are of Israel.” This distinction is not just a NT one. Moses originated it (Deut 10:16; 30:6), echoed by Jeremiah (4:4).

the blasphemy of them.--The associated verb can be used to describe abusive speech directed against either humans or God. This suggests that the noun can be used in the same two ways. But among its 19 instances in the NT there is no other place where it describes abuse of people. Here, John is probably using the term in a way parallel to the chief priests' accusation of our Lord when he claimed to be the Son of God. The blasphemy of the hypocritical Jews is in claiming to be God's people without truly knowing God. They are guilty of violating the Third Commandment, “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.”

but *are* the synagogue of Satan.--When they gather together, thinking that they are worshipping the Lord, in fact they are assembled to Satan.

In this sad experience of Israel, there is an important lesson for us. If those whose Jewishness is only outward are deemed blasphemers and the synagogue of Satan, what must God think of those whose

Christianity is only outward? The difference between apostate Christianity and the true faith is not one of degree, but of kind. They serve the prince of darkness. We serve the Lord Christ.

10a, Command: Fear Not, Be Faithful

Two commands, surrounding a description of what awaits them.

The Description

cast some of you into prison.--Our attention is immediately drawn to the unpleasant experience that awaits them. The Lord does not try to hide this. He was willing to be “the last,” so they should not shirk humiliation.

Who were the agents of this humiliation? At least three are involved.

The first is the false Jews of v. 9, who throughout the ancient world despised those who embraced the true hope of Israel. Confronted with the demands of the true Messiah, like their coreligionists in the gospel of John, they will not come to the light, lest their deeds should be reproved (John 3:20), but instead try to silence the messengers.

the devil shall cast some of you into prison.--The false Jews are not the ultimate agent. Though men torment the believers in Smyrna, ultimately it is their adversary the Devil who is behind them.

Eph 6:12 For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high *places*.

Knowing the power behind our opposition is what lets us obey our Lord's command,

Matt 5:44 But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;

He will deal with our enemies in due time, but our focus should be on recognizing that they are in bondage and laboring that they might repent of their sin and turn to the Lord.

that ye may be tried.--The purpose statement is fascinating. Whose purpose is here in view?

- Not the humans who abuse them—they are simply trying to avoid the reproof of their own sin.
- The devil does “try” them, in the sense of tempting them to sin.
- But the verb can also be used of the exercise through which God puts his saints in order to prove their sincerity, as in its first use in the Bible, Gen 22:1 (“God did tempt Abraham,” the first occurrence both of the Greek *peirazw* and its most common Hebrew correspondent *nissah*). And the next clause suggests that in this context, the verb also has this sense.

be tried ... have tribulation ten days.--The collocation of “tried” and “ten days” is an unambiguous recollection of Dan 1:12-15, Daniel's request to Melzar. The word rendered “prove” is translated by the LXX with the same word used here for “tried.”

Dan 1:12-15 12 **Prove** thy servants, I beseech thee, **ten days**; and let them give us pulse to eat, and water to drink. 13 Then let our countenances be looked upon before thee, and the countenance of the children that eat of the portion of the king's meat: and as thou seest, deal with thy servants. 14 So he consented to them in this matter, and **proved them ten days**. 15

And at the end of **ten days** their countenances appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the king's meat.

The Lord urges the believers of Smyrna to look on their suffering as a test like Daniel's, one intended to produce not failure but success, to prove the superiority of their faith and lead those who challenge them to confess their God.

The Commands

Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer.--The Lord echoes his teaching in the gospels (Matt 10:28, cf. Luke 12:4-7),

fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

We are to “run, looking unto Jesus, who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame” (Heb 12:1-2). He who was the first did not shrink from becoming the last, in order to fulfill his Father's will. Neither should we.

be thou faithful unto death.--The servant is not greater than his Lord (John 15:20). We, like him, may be called upon to die for the Lord, to “fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ,” Col 1:24. If this is the lot that the Lord has for us, the charge to us is, “Be faithful.”

10b, Promise

I will give thee a crown of life.--The expression appears only here and in James 1:12, where it is also linked with faithfulness through trial:

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.

The genitive is probably appositional, “the crown that is life.” Compare Ps. 21:3,4, which is a prophecy of the Lord's resurrection after his prayer for deliverance in Ps. 20.

The king shall joy in thy strength, O LORD; and in thy salvation how greatly shall he rejoice! 2
Thou hast given him his heart's desire, and hast not withholden the request of his lips. Selah. 3
For thou preventest him with the blessings of goodness: thou settest a crown of pure gold on his head. 4 He asked life of thee, *and* thou gavest *it* him, *even* length of days for ever and ever.

If Satan takes away our life, God promises to restore it—as a glorious gift, a memorial of our faithfulness and a sign of our triumph.

11, Promise to Overcomers

He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.--As the introduction to each letter looks back to ch. 1, so the conclusion looks forward to ch. 19-22. In this case the Lord anticipates the description of the Second Death (21:8) that faces those who reject the Lord. Those who follow the Lord through faithful suffering to death, accepting the last place, will not only receive resurrection life as a crown, but will also be immune to the judgment that will come on the disobedient.