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Letters to the Churches II: Smyrna – Revelation 2: 8-11

When we started this series last week, we took some time to examine at least in a little way what makes Revelation such a challenge. It's been said by many great Christian thinkers that some parts of Scripture seem to speak to part of history, and others, another: Revelation was a best-seller during the very early years of the church, but has been something of a cypher for many periods in the history of Christianity when our faith was riding high and mighty.

I also promised that we'd learn a few other things along our time with these messages to each of the seven churches. Last week, we reminded ourselves that we're accustomed to reading the Bible as if it were written to us as individuals, and certainly God does speak to each of our hearts uniquely through it as the Spirit works in us. But these letters are public statements, messages to be delivered to the angel, the spirit, of each church, the congregation gathered in Christ's name. These words speak to people as part of a whole, the whole being the spirit of the church.

Today's reminder is that the Bible wasn't written in a day or even a century – it is a collection of writings brought together into one volume, but written over time and by different authors. And while the New Testament came together far more quickly than the rest, Paul's letters, for example, were probably written before the Revelation; the Gospels written down as we have them likely after.

Because they're in one book, though, if we don't reflect on what we are reading and how it fits into the whole, it can be awfully easy to make some pretty unhelpful assumptions.

I've told this story before, but in my teenage years I was involved in a Bible study led by a person who habitually referred to the King James Version as the "St. James Version," and was known to have said to a person questioning her choice, "If the Saint James was good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for me."

Which, I confess, conjures up in my mind the picture of Jesus, waking up each morning, pulling out his Bible, and looking up what he was supposed to do that day – sort of a divine Day Timer. Absurd? Yes. But we ought to be careful about assumptions that make bad interpretations inevitable.

In graduate school, on my way to work, I used to listen to the Sunday morning broadcast from a preacher who subscribed to a peculiar interpretation of Scripture that rose up in England a couple hundred

years ago, and which held that the Twelve Tribes of Israel were really white Anglo-Saxons, that the people who call themselves Jews are really Satanic impostors. After all, isn't Bethlehem in Pennsylvania? Hebron in New York (and New Hampshire and Connecticut...)?

So, all of this is to say, remember that there is a library here in this volume, not a single book, and that we need to step back and get our bearings every now and then so we don't end up in a blind canyon on our Scriptural journey.

Today, in John's vision of Christ, we are invited to travel to Smyrna and hear what message John is commanded to deliver to the angel watching over the believers in that city.

Smyrna was, along with last week's city, Ephesus, and two more cities we'll visit later in this series, a major outpost of the Roman Empire at this time. It was a large, extremely well-organized city (the streets were laid out straight and square, which means that the government had a lot of power over people's land rights). It was very wealthy, and there's a lot of archeological and even literary material from the place.

It appears, though, that the Christian community was really being hit hard at the time of this letter. Jesus doesn't introduce himself as "the one who holds the seven stars in his hand and moves among the seven lampstands" the way he does to Ephesus, referring to the light their faith

shines around them. Here calls himself “the first and the last, who died and came back to life...” These are strong words of encouragement to a beleaguered band of disciples: they will live, even as Jesus lives; they will win through to eternal life.

There was a strong Jewish community in Smyrna, and its influence led the Christians into a conflict over the authority of the Law. This led some of the would-be followers of Christ to lean into the legalism that causes them to be called “Satan’s synagogue,” because Jesus’ death and resurrection, as Paul pounds out over and over again in his letters to other churches, freed us from the death of law-bound religiosity.

Where did that come from? Well, the major source for this part comes from a nearly contemporary commentator, who also explains the “ten days” of testing: in Judaism, the Ten Commandments, often thought of as the heart of the Law, are called the Ten Words – and the code here is that those who wanted to impose the legalism and religiosity of the Law on these newly-minted, freed, and redeemed believers were going to fight them, perhaps even take the upper hand, for a while. But then, they would overcome.

And the word for us? Watch out for those who would impose rules instead of grace, form for function, conformity for loving tolerance. Another famous contemporary commentator wrote, probably within years of the Revelation’s first circulation, “...we should not abandon

[those in the church] when they are even called a synagogue of Satan. For we know that the Lord has presented us with an example of longsuffering by tolerating Judas even unto the end.” (Tyconius, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 2.9)

Friends, if they could do it even at the threat of their lives then, we can practice this now – if for no other reason than that it isn’t always clear who’s side God is on, as anyone who’s studied war – even the warfare of the Hebrew Scriptures - knows well.

But all this leads into another bit of meat for us to chew on: “I know your hardship and poverty (though you are actually rich).” (v. 9) This was literally true: as one of the major headquarters of the Empire, the residents of Smyrna would have been required to participate in the cult of the Emperor, who was to be seen as a God, and sacrifices made and worshipful words used when talking about him.

Smyrna may have been rich, but these Christians were either poor (because they wouldn’t comply with emperor worship) or poor because they had to walk that thin line of appearing to comply with it.

As I worked my way deeper into this message, I couldn’t help but think of us here. We’ve been worrying about our monetary wealth for years, and yet – how does our faith compare to those who trust that God will see them through, even though there’s no water to drink, no food to

eat, violent danger around every corner, and disease or drugs waiting to snatch them up?

How on earth can we claim to be poor in the midst of the plenty that every single one of us has – at the very least, by comparison?

One thing that struck me hard as I worked my way through these writings of the early church, discovering how they made sense of these Scriptures before the church became “official” and OK, is that the authors often read these passages exactly opposite of what we’re accustomed to.

“I know your hardship and poverty (though you are actually rich).” Here’s how Tyconius, that fellow I quoted a minute ago reads it: “[Christ] speaks to every church that is poor in spirit yet possesses all things, as the apostle says, “as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.”

Now, I would have thought that this passage meant poor in things, yet rich in spirit – but Tyconius sees Christ issuing a wake-up call to those who think they have it all: both possessions and spirit.

This is the message that Christ entrusts to John to deliver to the angel, the spirit of the church at Smyrna: be faithful in everything in your life – everything – lest you be found “rich in things, yet poor in soul.”

Given this view, the view of the first Christians, what would a visionary, given a message for our church's angel, say to us?

This letter and the passages of Paul set up a dichotomy, a two-sided scene: wealth on one side, poverty on the other; spiritual poverty on one, spiritual riches on the other. At least in the case of the angel of Smyrna, the message is, the two things that are alike, either wealth or poverty, don't go well together.

What is the spirit of Valley Church? What do these words say to our spirit? The angel who reflects our spirit/spirits?

Take out your hymnals, turn to hymn 420, verse three, and say with me these words of Henry Emerson Fosdick: "Cure thy children's warring madness, bend our pride to Thy control; Shame our wanton, selfish gladness, Rich in things and poor in soul. Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, Lest we miss Thy Kingdom's goal, Lest we miss Thy Kingdom's goal." Amen.