

SMYRNA, YOU'VE GOT MAIL

A CHURCH ON THE EDGE

Revelation 2:8-11

Last time we began our journey through the seven letters Jesus wrote to his churches in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). We saw how the church at Ephesus, in an attempt to come to terms with a rapidly changing world had lost its first love and so was in great danger. Forty miles up the coast from Ephesus was another wealthy city, Smyrna. Still an important seaport today (now called Izmir), Smyrna rivalled Ephesus in many areas of life. Smyrna was the cultural capital of the region and an expensive place to live. If Ephesus was Cardiff of Asia Minor, Smyrna was the Stratford-upon-Avon. Smyrna had another claim to fame – it was the centre of the cult of the Emperor in that part of the world. Remember, the Romans worshipped the emperor as a sort of god and Smyrna was the place to go to carry out your religious and patriotic duties.

After the New Testament was complete, church leaders continued to write letters and we have many of those letters still. Some of them come from this area and Smyrna itself seems to have provided some key leaders in the days following the death of the apostles. From these people and their letters we know quite a bit about life in Smyrna at the time John sent this letter. The first thing we discover John hints at in 2:9. Though Smyrna was a wealthy city the small group of Christians there were poor. They were drawn from the lower end of the social ladder. Many were probably slaves, but unlike other places we know about, this congregation seemed to have no wealthy people at all. There were no rich people to pay the bills, no well-educated leaders to guide the congregation, no powerful people to look out for the church's interests. Yet they provided missionaries and leaders to the whole church and while the other churches in the area have largely disappeared, Izmir is the centre of Christianity in the region. Through today part of a secular Muslim country the church of Smyrna/Izmir claims to represent about 50% of the City's population!

It seems that the future of a church does not lie in the resources of the founder, or even current members. The first congregation in Smyrna must have looked around at their surroundings and wondered what they had let themselves in for. Not only had they little or nothing in the way of human resources, they also had enemies. In one of those verses that often gets us into trouble, 2:9 refers to 'a synagogue of Satan'. This is not, as it is sometimes represented, a description of all Jews. It refers to a group of Jews in Smyrna (and another in Philadelphia) who were actively persecuting the church.

I have already mentioned that Smyrna was a centre for Emperor worship. From other evidence we know that some Jews in the city, perhaps in an attempt to further their own position, were joining in these religious ceremonies even though it was against their own religion and unnecessary under Roman law. Perhaps as another way of furthering their position, this group of Jews informed against Christians. This certainly happened in other cities and was probably the case in Smyrna.

Though surrounded by enemies and without the benefit of human resources and support, the little church of Smyrna remained faithful. You may have noted that in this letter to Smyrna there is no criticism, no, 'but I have this against you'. But nor is there any promise that things were about to get better. No rich Christians just around the corner. No powerful citizen about to be converted and protect this vulnerable fellowship. In fact, quite the opposite was true. More persecution and hardship were on their way. 2:10 is another verse that gave some people a problem or two, with its talk of the devil and its reference to '10 days'. Personally, I would say there is enough evidence in Scripture, of which this verse is but one small part, and from looking at the world around us, to say that there really is a devil. I am not sure he is to blame for all the wrong in the world – we seem quite capable of making bad choices without any help from him. But there does appear to be what we might call a unifying factor, a central command. This great enemy, the church is told will continue the attack and try to destroy this small band of faithful followers.

I am not quite so sure about the meaning of '10 days'. Numbers and times did not mean the same thing in the ancient world as they do to us, and '10 days' is almost certainly *not* some coded reference to a mysterious period of time. The most likely meaning is something like, 'for a while'. However, the details need not hold us up, the point is clear. It may appear that the devil has the upper hand. It may even appear that God is either unable or unwilling to help. But it only appears that way. In fact in a while (however long that while may be) you will discover who is really in charge. This letter makes it clear that even the devil and death itself are subject to the second death, and as John makes clear later in this book, this second death is completely under God's control.

It can be very disheartening to struggle as our brothers and sisters in Smyrna struggled. We may not know the level of persecution they knew, but we sometimes feel that we are a little fellowship, without resources, influence or power, living on the edge of society with very little to show for our efforts. Jesus, however, seems to have other priorities. He does not call the church to dig deeper into whatever resources it does have. He does not call it to try to be more influential. His call is simply to be faithful, even when everything looks bad. And the result, a victor's crown and a life that will be secure even from the second death. A life that is safe in God's hands.

Amen

Sunday evening, 9 February 2020