

The Prince's Bride: What Revelation Meant to the Ones It Was Written To

Poor Yet Rich: The Letter to Smyrna

THE LETTER TO SMYRNA

Reading the Whole Letter

Every letter to the seven churches follows the same sevenfold pattern, though Smyrna is one of only two churches with no word of condemnation.

Revelation 2:8-11 (NRSVue)

And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of the First and the Last, who was dead and came to life: I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death.

CHRIST'S DESCRIPTION OF HIMSELF

Sovereign Over Time and History

Jesus' title here echoes God's own words in Isaiah, and John's first readers would have heard in it a direct challenge to Rome's claims over their lives.

Revelation 1:17-18 (NRSVue)

The First and the Last and the Living One. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever, and I have the keys of Death and of Hades.

Isaiah 41:4 (NRSVue)

Who has performed and done this, calling the generations from the beginning? I, the Lord, am first and will be with the last.

Isaiah 44:6 (NRSVue)

Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: I am the first, and I am the last; besides me there is no god.

Isaiah 48:12 (NRSVue)

Listen to me, O Jacob, and Israel, whom I called: I am he; I am the first, and I am the last.

Christ has revealed these divine traits through his resurrection from the dead.

G.K. Beale

I KNOW

The Lord Who Knows

Every letter opens with Jesus saying "I know," a reminder that he is intimately aware of what each church is facing, including ours.

Each letter begins, 'I know.' Jesus knew and understood these early believers' circumstances. When it came to their successes and their struggles, their trials and their tribulations, he was deeply aware and concerned, and he wrote to each church specifically about the context in which it found itself.

Alistair Begg, Truth for Life

Psalm 139:1-2, 4, 6 (NRSVue)

O Lord, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it.

THE WORLD SMYRNA LIVED IN

Loyalty to Rome, Pressure on the Church

Smyrna's wealth and status were bound up with the imperial cult, so refusing to take part in it cost Christians their place in the city's economic and social life.

The imperial cult permeated virtually every aspect of city and often even village life in Asia Minor, so that individuals could aspire to economic prosperity and greater social standing only by participating to some degree in the Roman cult. Citizens of both upper and lower classes were required by local law to sacrifice to the emperor on various special occasions, and sometimes even visitors and foreigners were invited to do so. It was almost impossible to have a share in a city's public life without also having a part in some aspect of the imperial cult.

G.K. Beale

Rich Toward God

The Smyrnaean Christians were destitute for refusing to compromise, yet Jesus calls them rich, pointing to a wealth this world cannot measure.

Luke 12:15-21 (NRSVue)

And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

2 Corinthians 8:9 (NRSVue)

For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

James 2:5 (NRSVue)

Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?

Ephesians 1:3-8 (NRSVue)

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight.

Ephesians 2:4-6 (NRSVue)

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ, by grace you have been saved, and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

1 Timothy 6:17-19 (NRSVue)

As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches but rather on God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

Money comes and goes; God doesn't. Money can't be relied upon, and even those who have plenty of it discover all too soon that it doesn't buy them contentment. The New Testament is clear from start to finish that the eventual goal of our pilgrimage will be in accordance with the life we have led. If we are poor, our required obedience will be appropriate for our poverty. If we are rich, our required obedience will be appropriate for our wealthy state, and it may mean giving it all away. The end in view is the life which really is life, as opposed to the life of the present age, which is a bare shadow of that which is to come.

N.T. Wright

Romans 10:13 (NRSVue)

For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

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