

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

The Devil on a Chain: Smyrna and the Story of Job

THE LETTER TO SMYRNA

Ten Days of Testing

Jesus tells the suffering Smyrnaean Christians exactly what is coming without explaining why, only that it has a limit and a reward on the other side.

Revelation 2:8-9 (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.

Revelation 2:10 (NRSVue)

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.

A FAMILIAR KIND OF SUFFERING

Job and the Church at Smyrna

Job's suffering parallels what Smyrna faced, though Job endured it without knowing why, while the Smyrnaean Christians were told plainly who was behind it and what to expect. The Hebrew text of Job calls the accuser 'ha-satan,' a title rather than a name.

Job 1:1-6 (NRSVue)

There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. He had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants, so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the East. His sons used to go and hold feasts in one another's houses in turn, and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. And when the feast days had run their course, Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all, for Job said, "It may be that my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts." This is what Job always did. One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and the accuser also came among them.

Job 1:7-12 (NRSVue)

The Lord said to the accuser, "Where have you come from?" The accuser answered the Lord, "From going to and fro on the earth and from walking up and down on it." The Lord said to the accuser, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil." Then the accuser answered the Lord, "Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." The Lord said to the accuser, "Very well, all that he has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against him!" So the accuser went out from the presence of the Lord.

THE ACCUSER AND THE DEVIL

One and the Same Adversary

The Septuagint translates Job's accuser as ho diabolos, the same title John later gives the ancient serpent, tying Job's story directly to the conflict behind Smyrna's suffering.

Revelation 12:7-9 (NRSVue)

And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world, he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

GOD'S PERFECT WAYS

Trusting What We Cannot Explain

Scripture repeatedly affirms that God's ways are just and perfect, even when his purposes are hidden from us.

Psalm 18:30 (NRSVue)

This God, his way is perfect; the promise of the Lord proves true; he is a shield for all who take refuge in him.

Deuteronomy 32:4 (NRSVue)

The Rock, his work is perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God, without deceit, just and upright is he.

Revelation 15:3 (NRSVue)

And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb: "Great and amazing are your deeds, Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, King of the nations!"

SATAN ON A CHAIN

Evil Under God's Authority

Evil is real, but it is never equal to God. Satan acts only within limits God sets, both with Job and with the church at Smyrna.

God sets the bounds. There is evil here, but not dualism, and perhaps we need to pause to register that fact. A great deal of popular Christian thinking operates with a sort of dualism, in which the whole of life is understood in terms of a battle between God and Satan, or between the Holy Spirit and the world of the demonic, as though these were all equal partners in a contest. But a dualism of good and evil is not the teaching of the Bible. Rather, God is always sovereign. And Satan is always only an adversary on a chain, always under God's authority and control.

Cited in the message as "one commentator"

One of the things that surprised me when I first read the New Testament seriously was that it talked so much about a Dark Power in the universe, a mighty evil spirit who was held to be the Power behind death and disease, and sin. The difference is that Christianity thinks this Dark Power was created by God, and was good when he was created, and went wrong. Christianity agrees with Dualism that this universe is at war. But it does not think this is a war between equal powers. It thinks it is a civil war, a rebellion, and that we are living in a part of the universe occupied by the rebel.

C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity

SUFFERING AND GLORY

Not Worth Comparing

Present suffering, however severe, is measured against a coming glory and a renewed creation that will make it seem small by comparison.

Romans 8:18 (NRSVue)

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

Revelation 21:9-11 (NRSVue)

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. It has the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal.

Revelation 21:22-27 (NRSVue)

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day, and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Revelation 22:1-7 (NRSVue)

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. And he said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true, for the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place." "See, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book."

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 (NRSVue)

So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For our slight, momentary affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen, for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

Romans 10:13 (NRSVue)

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

NOTES
