

The Church of the Servant King

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Prophecy Series

(Proph21C_Revelation_chps2&3 – Part 2)

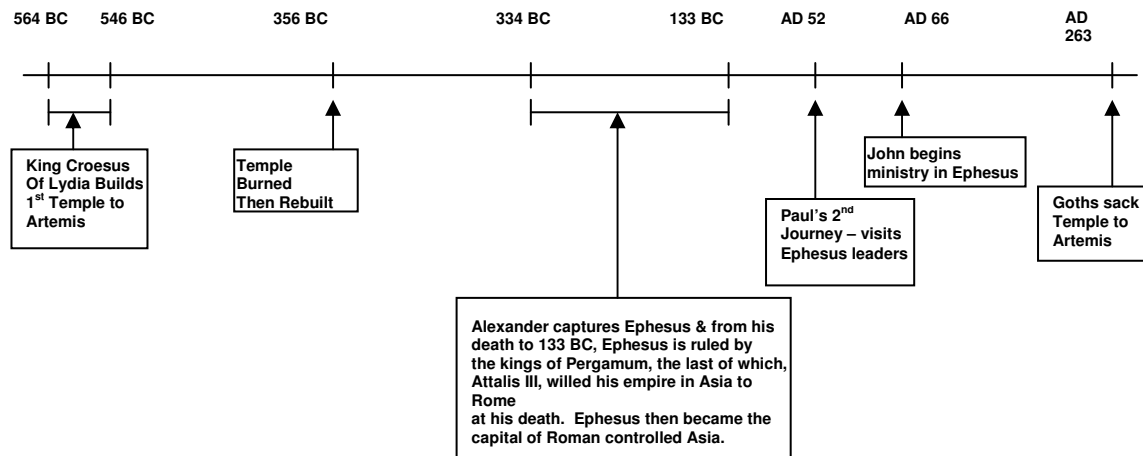
The Seven Churches (Rev 2:1-3:22)

In our previous study of these chapters, we briefly looked at three of the more prominent interpretive approaches to Revelation chapters 2 and 3 (i.e. the *prophetic* view, the *historico-prophetic* view and the *historical* view). We also examined the secular and NT historical background for the city of Ephesus, the location of the first local church mentioned in chapter 2. In today's study, we continue to examine each of the local churches that are specifically mentioned by Jesus in these two chapters. My approach to understanding these chapters and interpreting their content is consistent with the *historical* view of this passage – a view that at present, I believe to best represent the proper interpretation of this passage.

In today's study, I will mention two other interpretive approaches, i.e. the *preterist* and the *futurist*. These schools of thought will be presented in more detail in a future study; however, suffice it to say for now that these terms relate to interpretive approaches that involve the whole of the book versus just chapters 2 and 3. The *prophetic*, *historico-prophetic*, and the *historical* views examined in our prior study relate to only chapters 2 and 3.

A brief recap of some significant dates mentioned in regard to the history of Ephesus – the first location of the seven churches mentioned follows.

EPHESUS (Recap of Some Significant Dates)



SMYRNA

Historical Facts

Originally Smyrna began as a Grecian colony shortly before 1000 BC. It was destroyed in 627 BC by Lydia. The site remained a barren waste surrounded by a few villages until two of Alexander the Great's successors re-established the city in 290 BC. The re-established city lay near the eastern end of a deep gulf located on the eastern shore of the Aegean Sea. The deep gulf provided an excellent harbor that has allowed the city to survive and thrive economically even to the present day – a city that today has a population of about 200,000.

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In addition, the city lay at the end of a road which led from a rich valley containing the Hermus river on the interior. Therefore, the city served as a point of origin to the sea for all of the valley's trade. The large volume of trade brought the city into contact with the Romans and the ties with Rome were strengthened when the city entered into an alliance with Rome against the Mithradites, Carthage, and the Seleucid kingdom. The city even built a temple honoring Rome in 195 BC. In AD 26, Rome selected Smyrna over all of the other cities of Asia for the location of a new temple to be dedicated to Tiberius. At the end of the 1st Century AD when John wrote Revelation, the city had suffered through several earthquakes. The city was again destroyed by an earthquake in AD 177 only to be rebuilt by Marcus Aurelius. "In John's day it was a city that had been 'resurrected from the dead,' in that it had been destroyed 700 years earlier and had laid in ruins for 300 years."¹

Smyrna was the most beautiful of the cities of Asia Minor. Its streets were well paved and in outlying areas, the streets were lined with groves. The city was surrounded by sturdy walls with public buildings situated in an orderly manner on the hill above the city which was known as the "crown of Smyrna."² Smyrna was also noted as a center of learning in science and medicine and was reputed to be the birthplace of Homer.³

Pagan religions had a large influence upon the city's population. Temples to Cybele, Zeus, Apollo, Asklepios, and Aphrodite lined the street which led up the hill in such a manner that "... the street was compared to a necklace of jewels around the neck of a statue."⁴ Cybele (the Greek goddess of retributive justice a.k.a. Nemesis) was considered the protecting deity and Smyrna was the only place she was worshipped.⁵

These believers would have found encouragement that even though the prospect of death threatened them resurrection and eternal life with Christ were certain. Smyrna had died as a city on several occasions because of invasions and earthquakes, but it had risen again to new life because the residents had rebuilt it. In Smyrna many residents worshipped a goddess named Cybele whom they regarded as the personification of the yearly rejuvenation of nature. Her devotees claimed that she arose from the dead every spring.⁶

However, the most important religion for our purposes was the worship of the Roman emperor which was all the more intense in Smyrna because of its close ties with Rome. Emperor worship was made compulsory for every Roman citizen by Domitian (AD 81-96). Each year citizens were given a certificate after burning incense on Caesar's altar where they would confess Caesar as Lord. Without the certificate, a person risked the death penalty. The Jews frequently informed authorities about Christians who had failed to comply which resulted in many Christians'

¹ Steve Gregg, *Revelation, Four Views, A Parallel Commentary* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 66.

² Robert L. Thomas, "The Chronological Interpretation of Revelation 2 – 3," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 124:496 (October, 1967), 159.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 160.

⁶ Thomas Constable, "Notes on Revelation," www.soniclight.com

deaths.⁷ “Nowhere was life more dangerous for a Christian ...mass executions of Christians happened on numbers of occasions.”⁸

New Testament Background Involving Smyrna

The founding of the Christian church in Smyrna remains a mystery. However, it is likely that its founding is related to Paul’s ministry in Ephesus which was only thirty-five miles away.⁹

Failure to pay homage to Caesar and declare him lord resulted in not only physical persecution, but difficulty in social and business life. Without the certificate from the authorities, it would have been difficult to form the relationships necessary to conduct business.¹⁰

There is little doubt that those who adhere to a *preterist* interpretation of the book of Revelation view the circumstances faced by Smyrna in some way related to or a fulfillment of the circumstances John described in such passages as Revelation 13 (describes the anti-Christ and the false prophet of Israel). Since the *preterist* views the fulfillment of Revelation’s prophecies as having already occurred in the ancient past, the “beast” would have been interpreted as Caesar and those who did not possess a certificate evidencing their acknowledgment of Caesar as lord would be slain.¹¹ Such a position would require an early dating of the book of Revelation (i.e. pre AD 70).¹²

However, I believe that the difficulties such a position creates in regard to a consistent interpretation of the prophecies of Revelation and other Old Testament books such as Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel serve to negate the validity of the *preterist* position in favor of the *futurist* interpretation.

While Rome was tolerant of any religion which did not forbid emperor worship, the spiritual Christian could not participate in such idolatry. The persecution Christians faced in Smyrna for not taking part in the worship of the emperor was only exacerbated by the virulent Jewish community. Smyrna had the largest Jewish population of any city in Asia Minor.¹³ The apostle John, as was the case with Paul, viewed the true “Jew” as one who believed in Christ (cf. Gal 3:7, 26-29 cf. Rom 9:6-9).

John distinguished, as did Paul, between a material and a spiritual Jewry. An Israel which had abandoned its calling, crucified its Messiah, and given itself to the harrying and persecution of the Church, had forfeited in the minds of both apostles all claim to privilege. Hence the uncompromising severity of this letter.¹⁴

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ E. M. Blaiklock, *The Seven Churches, an Exposition of Revelation, Chapters Two and Three* (Wheaton, Illinois: Van Kampen Press), 25.

¹⁰ Ibid., 30.

¹¹ Gregg, *Four Views*, 2 & 15.

¹² Ibid., 14-18.

¹³ Ibid., 67.

¹⁴ Blaiklock, *The Seven Churches, An Exposition*, 30.

The writer has his own usage of the term 'Jew.' He insists that the true people of God is a spiritual nation, not an ethnic group. The Christians were now the true Jews; those who maintained a racial separation had rejected the Christ, according to John, and were of Satan.¹⁵

Our Passage – Revelation 2:8-11

Jesus highlighted the patient labor of the believers in Ephesus in the midst of evil and false apostles (2:2-3), yet also noted that they had lost their “first love” for Him – evidently becoming beholden to tradition instead of dynamic fellowship. For the church at Smyrna, Jesus highlighted their “tribulation and poverty” in this world (2:9). Jesus has only encouraging words for the believers in Smyrna.

8 “And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this: 9 ‘I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 ‘Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. 11 ‘He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.’¹⁶

The temptation to give in to the pressure to participate in such an innocuous activity as offering a pinch of incense upon the altar would have been powerful in the face of such consequences. No doubt, many believers lost courage and many others were slain. Such circumstances are the backdrop for Revelation 2:9.

The name of the city, Smyrna, means “myrrh,” an ordinary perfume. It was also used in the anointing oil of the tabernacle, and in embalming dead bodies (cf. Ex. 30:23; Ps. 45:8; Song 3:6; Matt. 2:11; Mark 15:23; John 19:39). While the Christians of the church at Smyrna were experiencing the bitterness of suffering, their faithful testimony was like myrrh or sweet perfume to God.¹⁷

The period of testing and tribulation for the Christians of Smyrna was to be of limited duration based upon Revelation 2:10. While there is no record in history of any literal period of 10 days of persecution endured by these believers, some scholars believe that this prediction relates to ten waves of persecution or ten emperors who persecuted the Church in the first three centuries.¹⁸ (This would be consistent with the prophetic view or perhaps even the historico-prophetic view of chapters 2 and 3). Others believe that this prediction is a figurative way of stating that the persecution will be of a relatively short and limited duration.¹⁹ “At all events, the

¹⁵ Colin J. Hemer,, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* (Trowbridge, Wiltshire, Great Britain: JSOT Press, 1986), 67.

¹⁶ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from *The New American Standard Bible*, (La Habra, California: The Lockman Foundation, 1977).

¹⁷ John Walvoord, “Revelation,” in John F. Walvoord, and Roy B. Zuck, editors *The Bible Knowledge Commentary – New Testament*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press Publications, Inc., 1983, 1985), 934.

¹⁸ Gregg, *Four Views*, 67.

¹⁹ Blaiklock, *The Seven Churches, An Exposition*, 31.

whole spirit and scope of the passage is to give us the idea of a brief period of tribulation, and thus to afford comfort and encouragement to the faithful in the Church at Smyrna.”²⁰

Apparently up to this time none had died, but this could be expected. Later Polycarp, having become the bishop of the church in Smyrna, was martyred, and undoubtedly others were also killed.²¹

The persecution and testing that this early church endured only served to strengthen the faith and solidarity of Christians in Smyrna. There is no criticism given by the Lord to these Christians and in comparison to all the other churches with the exception of Philadelphia, there is no call to repent.²² In Smyrna, the “... light of Christianity has never been extinct from Apostolic times.”²³

“The crown of life” is one of several crowns promised to Christians (cf. 1 Cor. 9:25; 1 Thes. 2:19; 2 Tim. 4:6-8; 1 Peter 5:4; Rev. 4:4). The crown of life is also mentioned in James 1:12. Believers are encouraged to be faithful by contemplating what awaits them after death, namely, eternal life. As in all the letters, an exhortation is given to the individuals who will listen. The promise is given to overcomers, referring in general to all believers, assuring them that they **will not be hurt at all by the second death** (cf. Rev. 20:15).²⁴

²⁰ Andrew Tait, *The Messages to the Seven Churches of Asia Minor: An Exposition of the First Three Chapters of the Book of the Revelation* (London, England: Hodder and Stoughton, 1884), 205.

²¹ Walvoord, “Revelation” in Walvoord and Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 935.

²² Gregg, *Four Views*, 67.

²³ Tait, *The Messages*, 184.

²⁴ John Walvoord, “Revelation,” in John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 935.