

SALVATION IN SYMBOLS & SIGNS

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Corresponds to Program 8

SMYRNA-BITTERSWEET STUDY GUIDE

THE CHURCH IN SMYRNA

Revelation 2:8-11

The church at Smyrna is an interesting one. It is one of only two churches that Christ has no words of correction for, the other being Philadelphia. The time period for the Church of Smyrna is from AD 100 to AD 313.

Again, we see Jesus walking with His people. He knows our “works” and our situation. As we noted earlier God’s love for us is changeless and therefore we find hope in our failures (Malachi 3:6). Yet this church has no words of rebuke from Christ. They are poor in this world’s wealth, but they are rich in heaven’s faith:

“I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich).”
Revelation 2:9

There is another reference in the New Testament book of James that explains what this means:

“Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?” James 2:5 NKJV

This is a great example as to how the book of Revelation is to be interpreted. By the Bible itself. Often we miss a correct understanding of these symbolic words because we neglect to let the rest of the Bible explain Revelation. This prophetic book is not isolated from the canon of Scripture. It is rather a summary of all of Scripture. It is a masterpiece that brings together the entire Bible in one final book and summarizes for us the gospel of Jesus Christ and the powers that seek to

undermine this good news of salvation. Revelation borrows from the rest of the Bible. The Bible tells us what Revelation means. It interprets the symbols. This verse from James confirms that.

The last part of this verse says, “and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan” (verse 9).

Again we can go to the Bible to understand what John means by those who say they are Jews and are not. In Romans 2 Paul says:

“For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.” Romans 2:28, 29 NKJV.

These verses in Romans tell us that “Jews” are not the literal outward circumcised kind, but rather those believers in Jesus Christ who are circumcised in the heart and in the Spirit. These are Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:29).

The Cycle of History

What we also see developing here is a new cycle for the Christian church that is similar to the Old Testament cycle. The first church of Ephesus was likened to Genesis where mankind had a first love experience with Jesus but lost it by turning from God and depending on themselves. As the narrative continues in Exodus God’s people face



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KEY SCRIPTURES

Revelation 2:8-11 CHURCH IN SMYRNA

Romans 2:28,29; Galatians 3:29 SPIRITUAL JEWS

John 11:11-13; 25-26 SLEEP/DEATH, ETERNAL LIFE

SMYRNA (BITTERSWEET MYRRH)

(AD 100-313) Lots of death language; myrrh was used to embalm the dead. During the last ten years of this time period, the Church was heavily persecuted.

heavy persecution as we see here in Smyrna. The Bible again instructs us concerning these repeating cycles:

“That which has been is what will be, That which is done is what will be done, And there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which it may be said, ‘See, this is new’? It has already been in ancient times before us.” Ecclesiastes 1:9-10 NKJV.

God also affirms this through Paul in his letter to the church in Corinth:

“Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come” 1 Corinthians 10:11.

This also helps us to understand why the Bible does not contain the exhaustive history of every nation. Human nature is basically the same. There is nothing new. The principles of one nation and its history apply to all nations. The needs of one nation are the needs of all—salvation from sin through the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

“Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw 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.” Revelation 2:10 NKJV

Persecution for the gospel was about to come upon the believers, as we see in verse 10. Many indeed, were imprisoned for the faith. It was necessary for God to allow this to purify the church. Persecution always shakes out the false believers, and those who are not serious about following Jesus. Persecution is like a purifying fire that draws God’s people closer to Him and drives false hearted followers out of the church.

It is obvious that this persecution was neither for 10 literal days nor was it only in one church or area. Here is where we can apply the “day for a year” principle of prophetic time (Numbers 14:34; Ezekiel 4:6). There were, indeed, ten

years of persecution, which have been verified in the pages of history. The time period for the persecution of Christians everywhere was from AD 303 to AD 313 under Roman Emperor Diocletian.

All the Christian churches suffered under the Diocletian persecution. The letters to the seven churches represents seven successive periods from the apostolic age to the return of Jesus. The Diocletian persecution would strike all Christians during this 10-year period foretold in the AD 100 to AD 313 time frame of the church in Smyrna. And this ten-year period was fulfilled from AD 303-AD 313.

Sleep, Death and the Second Death

“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.’” Revelation 2:11 NKJV

The term “second death” is unique to the book of Revelation, but again it can be understood by careful study in other books of the Bible. In this case the book of John chapter 11 offers some great insight. Here we find the story of Lazarus, friend of Jesus who has died of a sickness. In speaking of his death Jesus tells His disciples that Lazarus is sleeping and that Jesus is going to wake him out of sleep (John 11:11-13). Unfortunately Christ’s disciples didn’t get it, and neither do many us of today, so Jesus plainly said, Lazarus is dead (verse 14). For the believer, Jesus has turned death into a sleep, but since we have not understood that any better than Christ’s disciples, the book of Revelation describes a second death, a permanent end to all who refuse Jesus, the Resurrection and the Life (John 11:25-26).

Jesus makes precious promises to His church, that to those who remain faithful, their place in the Kingdom of God is assured. We may sleep in death awaiting Christ’s return, but we will never die (experience the permanent death of the lake of fire-Revelation 20:13-14). ★

Personal Application

Is it your desire to remain faithful to Jesus and accept all of His precious promises to His church? _____

