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Revelation #4

Seeing the “So That” in Suffering Revelation 2:8-11

A straight sail from the island of Patmos of approximately 50 miles brings one to the port of Ephesus at the mouth of the river Cayster. Traveling up coast some 35 miles almost due north of Ephesus is the city of Smyrna (population @ 100,000). It is the only one of the seven cities still in existence today (modern Izmir in western Turkey). Smyrna was a proud and beautiful city and regarded itself as the “pride of Asia.” The people of Smyrna were quite sensitive to the rivalry with Ephesus for recognition as the most splendid city of Asia Minor.

Of the seven churches, only Smyrna and Philadelphia receive *no complaint* from the Lord. There is only *commendation, encouragement and a promise of eternal life* to the one who overcomes. Perhaps the reason there is no cause for complaint is that *Smyrna was a suffering church*. The letter is devoted almost exclusively to an account of their past and present trials, a warning of yet more persecution to come, and a strengthening word of encouragement from the One who knows all too well the pain of scorn and death. Why did the church in Smyrna suffer? The answer is two-fold.

First, Smyrna was famous for its patriotic loyalty to the empire and its emperor. In 29 a.d. all Asian cities were competing for the coveted favor of erecting a temple in honor of Emperor Tiberius. Smyrna won! It was a city fervent with emperor worship. The civil authorities didn't care so much that Christians worshiped Jesus, so long as they also worshiped the emperor. So when the believers in Smyrna refused to pay religious homage by sprinkling incense on the fire which burned before the emperor's bust, it no doubt fanned the flames of hostility against them. It was dangerous to be a faithful Christian in Smyrna!

Second, great antagonism existed within the Jewish community toward the church. This no doubt stemmed in part from their conviction that to worship a crucified carpenter from Nazareth was foolishness. Worse still, it was blasphemy (see especially 1 Cor. 1:18-25). There was also undoubtedly a measure of bitterness at the loss of so many from their ranks to the new faith.

The Jews were known to inform the authorities of Christian activities, the latter being perceived as treason. Jewish opposition to the church at Smyrna is the focus of v. 9 where Jesus refers to those “who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.” Clearly, in one sense, these people *are* Jews, the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who met regularly in the synagogue to worship. Yet, in another sense, i.e., inwardly and spiritually, they are *not* Jews, having rejected Jesus and now persecuted and slandered his people.

But if they are false Jews, who, then, are the true Jews? If they are a *synagogue of Satan*, who, then, constitute the *synagogue of God*? John does not provide an explicit answer, but the implication seems clear. A “true Jew” is a man or woman, ***regardless of ethnicity***, who has embraced in faith Jesus as Messiah. In Romans 2:28-29 and again in Philippians 3:3, Paul described it this way:

“For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter” (Rom. 2:28-29).

“For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh” (Phil. 3:3).

I need to pause here and make a parenthetical comment. There is simply and without qualification no place whatsoever in the Christian faith for any degree of anti-Semitism! Jesus was a Jew. All twelve of the apostles were Jews. The entire Bible, except for the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, was written by Jews. How much did the Apostle Paul love the Jewish people? “For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsman according to the flesh” (Rom. 9:3). He writes in Romans 10:1, “my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.” There is no place in the Christian’s heart or in the Church of Jesus Christ for Jewish jokes or stereotypes or ridicule. Be forewarned: I won’t tolerate it for a second at Bridgeway!

Sadly, some have appealed to texts like Revelation 2:9-10 to justify anti-Semitism. It is true that some Jews in Smyrna in the first century had been deceived by Satan and were being used by him to oppress and persecute Christians. Many of the Jewish leaders opposed and persecuted Jesus and conspired with Rome to crucify him. But it wasn’t true of all Jewish people. And let us never forget that ***all ethnic groups*** throughout history have at one time or another been guilty of persecuting Christians.

Our attitude toward Jews who reject Jesus as the Messiah must be the same as it is toward anyone of any ethnicity who rejects Jesus: pray for them, love them, and make whatever sacrifice you can to make known to them the love that Jesus has for all sinners.

We live in a day when we Christians will be accused of many things: we are anti-Semitic (because we insist on faith in Jesus as Messiah to be saved), anti-choice (because we oppose abortion), anti-gay (because we won’t affirm homosexual intercourse), anti-woman (because we believe in a male only Eldership in the local church), and anti-intellectual (because we don’t

embrace biological evolution). They will accuse us of being unloving, narrow-minded, intolerant bigots because we believe in the reality of something called the “second death” (i.e, hell; v. 11) and that the only way of escape from it is through faith in Jesus Christ. And our response to all such anti-Christian rhetoric is to love them and pray for them and tell them ever more fervently and humbly about eternal life that can be found in Jesus.

The Relationship between Suffering and Sanctification

What is of paramount importance, however, is that we see ***the relationship between suffering and sanctity***. No one put it better or more to the point than Peter in his first epistle: “In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith – more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:6-7).

This undoubtedly was true of the church at Smyrna. Trials are grievous, says Peter. Let no one pretend they are anything less than painful and distressing. But there is always a ***divine design*** in our suffering that, when seen and embraced, energizes the heart to persevere. Praise be to God: there is always a “so that” in our suffering, always a higher spiritual end in view for the sake of which God orchestrates our troubles and trials.

Could this possibly be why the church in Smyrna escaped rebuke and was spared the threat of divine discipline addressed to the Ephesians? Had the “genuineness” of their “faith” been proven in (indeed, because of) the fire of affliction? Had the spurious and surface dimensions of their trust in God been burned away, leaving their faith as pure as gold (at least, as pure as faith can be this side of heaven)? Yes.

Suffering isn’t designed by God to destroy our faith but to intensify it. That will never happen, however, if we fail to ***look beyond the pain to the purpose*** of our loving heavenly Father. His design is to knock out from underneath us every false prop that we might rely wholly on him. His aim is to create in us such desperation that we have nowhere else to look but to his promises and abiding presence.

There is, then, an alternative to cratering under the weight of distress. We need not yield either to ***bitterness***, because things haven’t gone our way, or to ***doubt***, because we can’t figure out God’s ways, or to ***anger***, because we feel abandoned. Rather, we can by his grace strive to see the “so that” in his mysterious and providential mercies. And even when we can’t see it, trust him anyway!

Suffering comes in many forms and in varying degrees, as the Christians in Smyrna would no doubt testify. But regardless of how it manifests itself, suffering tends to evoke one of two reactions in the soul of the Christian: ***dependency*** or ***disillusionment***. One example of the former

is found in the Apostle Paul's reaction to a life-threatening incident that brought him to the brink of despair. Rather than yielding to *disillusionment with God* he was driven to *dependency upon him*. The entire scenario, he later said, was "to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead" (2 Corinthians 1:9). For many, however, disillusionment triumphs over dependency, often leading to a crippling bitterness that threatens both our enjoyment in life and our effectiveness in ministry.

The reason for this, at least in part, is that *suffering has a disorienting effect on the soul*. What I mean is that pain, whether physical or emotional or both, contributes to *a loss of perspective*. We can see little else but the problem and its disruptive impact on every sphere of life. We feel lost and directionless, not knowing how to extricate ourselves from the mess we're in. There's no spiritual compass, so to speak, that points us to God and perhaps to some explanation for why we have to endure such unspeakable hurt.

This is why many who suffer experience deep disillusionment with God. "Doesn't he know what is happening? Doesn't he care? And if he does, why doesn't he do something about it? Maybe he's simply too busy or too weak." In any case, they feel lost at sea, adrift and carried hopelessly beyond the safety of the shore by wave after wave of disappointment and pain and shattered dreams and loss of friends and, well, whatever else it is that simply won't go away. To make sense of what is happening we need a point of reference, a "north star", as it were, to guide us back home and restore a measure of hope.

So how did the Smyrnan Christians pull through given all they were facing? I'll return to the nature and extent of their suffering in a moment, but it surely entailed at least four dimensions. **First**, they were in the throes of "tribulation" and "poverty" (Revelation 2:9). These are so inextricably linked in the experience of the Christians in Smyrna that I list them as one. **Second**, they were being slandered (2:9). **Third**, some of them were about to be imprisoned for their faith (2:10a). **Fourth**, some even faced martyrdom (2:10b).

My immediate concern is with how the Smyrneans avoided disillusionment, or better still, how Jesus himself proposed that they remain faithful and utterly dependent on God. We know they resisted the temptation to fall into despair or bitterness, but how? Part of the answer is found in the opening words of Jesus in his letter to them. In particular, it's found in how he is identified: "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: 'The words of *the first and the last, who died and came to life*'" (2:8).

This description of Jesus is taken from the portrayal of him in Revelation 1:18. But what possible difference could it make in their lives (or in ours) that Jesus is "the first and the last"? How does knowledge of that truth counteract the discombobulating effects of suffering? At first glance, knowing this about Jesus seems utterly irrelevant in the face of constant pain or financial loss or the breakdown of intimate relationships or, worst of all, the ominous prospect of physical death itself.

In fact, however, I suggest that nothing could more readily overcome disillusionment than knowledge of this truth. As I said earlier, suffering tends to bring disorientation to our hearts, a sense of being alone and lost and without a point of reference. Prolonged suffering breeds a feeling of chaos and loss of control. We ask: “Will I ever emerge from this dark tunnel? Is there an end in view? A purpose? Is there anything more ultimate than my own immediate discomfort that might enable me to persevere?”

Yes! In saying that he is the “first and the last” Jesus is affirming his comprehensive control over all of history, over every event that transpires within the parameters established by the terms “first” and “last.” As the one who is *first*, he is the source of all things. Nothing preceded him that might account for your suffering or suggest that it is outside the boundaries of his sovereign sway. As the *last* he is the one toward whom all things are moving, the goal for which they exist, and the final explanation for all that is and occurs. They can look at their plight, feel their pain, calculate their losses, and still say: “But our Lord is the One who created it all, and he is the One for whom it is all being sustained and directed. ***My condition is not beyond the scope of his authority. He does have jurisdiction!*** Furthermore, if he is the ‘last’, if he is the one who stands as much on the back side of history as he did on the front end, then I know that what I’m enduring for his sake is not without purpose or fruit.”

The believers in Smyrna were themselves facing death. Martyrdom was a very real possibility (see Rev. 2:10). They needed to be reassured that physical death was nothing to fear, that it marked not the end but the beginning of true life, and that no matter how severe the suffering they would *never* taste the “second death” (2:11) that awaits those who deny Jesus.

In 2:10 he declares, “***Do not fear*** what you are about to suffer.” This word of reassurance finds its basis in the fact that Jesus has conquered both sin and death. The believer need not fear either suffering or martyrdom, for Jesus has endured both and emerged victorious, and we are inseparably and eternally “in him”! Suffering is a given, an inescapable fact of life for the Christian. Its effects, on the other hand, are dependent on us. May God graciously energize our souls and enlighten our hearts that we, through the fog of anguish and disappointment, might see the light of *his* sovereignty, the one who is First and Last, who has died and come to life!

The Nature of their Suffering

Jesus singles out ***four dimensions*** of their suffering. Let’s look briefly at each, not out of academic curiosity, but in order to ask ourselves: “Is my faith such that it would survive, indeed thrive, under such threats?”

First, reference is made in Revelation 2:9a to their “tribulation” and “poverty”. But why were these believers “poor” in a city as prosperous as Smyrna? Perhaps they were from the lower ranks of society, economically speaking. It’s possible they had exceeded their means in generous giving to others. But this would not explain why their poverty is part of their tribulation, and the association of the two words here indicates they are linked.

In some measure the poverty was due to their voluntary exclusion from the many trade guilds in Smyrna, seedbeds of vice, immorality, and unscrupulous business dealings. In addition, they probably struggled to find employment precisely because they were Christians. Most likely, however, as Hebrews 10:34 indicates, their homes and property had been looted and pillaged. As John Stott says, “make no mistake: it does not always pay to be a Christian. Nor is honesty by any means always the best policy, if material gain is your ambition” (39).

Material gain was most assuredly not the ambition of the Smyrneans! I’m confident that, like those believers in Hebrews 10, they “joyfully accepted the plundering” of their “property,” knowing that they “had a better possession and an abiding one” (v. 34). In the case of the Christians at Smyrna, they had “riches” their enemies couldn’t understand, “wealth” that couldn’t be stolen, “possessions” that weren’t vulnerable to theft or rust or devaluation or falling stock prices. Indeed, despite their material poverty, Jesus declares that they are “rich” (Rev. 2:9).

Perhaps we should pause quietly and ask ourselves, “How do I measure real wealth? Is the treasure of knowing Jesus Christ of sufficient value that I regard myself as incomparably rich although I own little? If I were to lose everything but him, would I still consider myself blessed?”

Second, they were repeatedly slandered (v. 9a). Jesus doesn’t specify the nature of this slander (lit., blasphemy), but I assume it included attacks on their character, mockery of their beliefs (“You put your trust in a crucified carpenter! Ha!”), and most of all hateful indignities heaped on their Lord.

Third, we read that some of them would be thrown into “prison” (v. 10). We must remember that imprisonment in Roman communities like Smyrna wasn’t technically considered a punishment. Prisons were used for one of three reasons: (1) to compel and coerce obedience to the order of a magistrate; (2) to keep the accused confined pending the trial date; or (3) to detain the guilty until the time of execution. The words “unto death” (v. 10b) indicate that the third is in view.

There are several options to interpreting the meaning of “ten days” of “tribulation”. Some say it means literally ten days and leave it at that. Another view is that it simply refers to a short, limited period of time, while others suggest that it points to extreme or complete tribulation. It’s possible that Jesus had Daniel 1:12-15 in mind where the “testing” of Daniel and his three friends is said to be for “ten days

Fourth, they were facing martyrdom itself. There’s simply no escaping the fact that some of them would die. Yet *Jesus does nothing to prevent it*. He doesn’t alleviate their poverty nor publicly vindicate his people in the face of those who hurled their indignant slander. And when Satan moves to incite their imprisonment and eventual execution, *he chooses not to intervene*. There are certainly numerous instances in biblical days and in the history of the church when it was otherwise (see Heb. 11:32-34). But not always (see Heb. 11:35-38).

Perhaps when we encounter such texts our question should be of a different sort. Instead of asking, “Why do Christians suffer persecution?” we ought to inquire, “Why do Christians *not* suffer persecution?” John Stott put it pointedly: “The ugly truth is that we tend to avoid suffering by compromise. Our moral standards are often not noticeably higher than the standards of the world. Our lives do not challenge and rebuke unbelievers by their integrity or purity or love. *The world sees in us nothing to hate*” (43).

Faith Sustained while Suffering

Jesus calls for our faithfulness in such circumstances no less than he called for theirs (v. 10). But it’s not automatic. Endurance doesn’t “just happen”. Faithfulness is the fruit of faith. In other words, *there are truths we must embrace if we are to endure*. Unbelief leads to bitterness and despair. Although Jesus chose not to intervene and deliver the Smyrneans from suffering, he by no means abandoned them. Look with me again at his words of counsel, for in them are the power to persevere. There are three things to note.

First, I’ve already had occasion to mention how his knowledge of our situation is a source of strength (“I know your tribulation and your poverty,” v. 9a). Our knowledge of his knowledge of us is a powerful incentive to remain faithful when the world, flesh, and the devil conspire to yell “Quit!” But there’s more.

Second, observe closely that there are *divinely imposed limits* on how far Satan can go in his efforts to destroy us. For the Christians at Smyrna, not unlike the situation with Job, the enemy is given a long leash. But he can only go as far as God permits. Satan is unable to act outside the parameters established by the will of his Creator. In this case, he will instigate their incarceration, but only for “ten days” (v. 10).

“Wait a minute! How can you say that Satan is limited in what he can do if some of those he throws into prison end up getting killed?” That’s a good question. Here’s my answer.

Just as there was a divinely imposed limitation on what Satan could perpetrate, there was a divinely ordained purpose for it: to “*test*” them (v. 10). In giving them over to the Devil for imprisonment, and for some, death, God had not forsaken his people. This was not a sign of his disdain or rejection, but a means by which to test and try and refine and purify their trust in Christ. I find it incredibly instructive that *what Satan intended for their destruction, God designed for their spiritual growth!* Satan’s intent was to undermine their faith, not to “test” it. Yet God orchestrated the entire scenario as a way of honing and stabilizing and solidifying the faith of the church in Smyrna.

The **third** encouraging thing for us to note is that *the death Satan inflicts issues in life for the believer!* In v. 10b Jesus encourages the Smyrneans to remain faithful unto (physical) death and he will give them “the crown of life.” Jesus reminds them of this because he knows that *the*

power to persevere comes from a vibrant faith in the certainty of God's promised reward. Those who do not love "their lives even unto death" (Rev. 12:11) are granted a "life" that infinitely transcends anything this earthly existence could ever afford. Jesus does not call for faithfulness unto death without reminding us that there awaits us in the future a quality and depth of true and unending life that far outweighs whatever sacrifice is made in the present.

This is precisely the point Paul made in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18. He refused to "lose heart" because he knew that "this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal."

Among the countless "unseen things" on which Paul fixed his faith was undoubtedly the certainty of "the crown of life" given to all who know Jesus. There is power to persevere in the promise of reward. ***We must intentionally lay hold of the future and impose it on the present.***

No Harm from the Second Death

So, I want to talk a moment about hell. That's right, hell. Let's pause for a moment and give thanks that those who know and love Jesus "will not be hurt by the second death."

The "***second death***" is mentioned three other times in Revelation, each of which reinforces the fact that this is Jesus' (and John's) way of referring to ***eternal punishment in the lake of fire***. We read in Revelation 20:6, "Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years." Later in the same chapter (20:14), we are told that "Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire." Finally, in Revelation 21:8 we read, "But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death."

Clearly, then, ***the "second death" is the lake of fire, the place of eternal torment for those who do not know and love our Lord Jesus Christ.*** The "first death" would be physical death, the death that Jesus said some in Smyrna would suffer because of their faith in him. The point of his promise, then, is this: no matter how much you may endure physically in the present, you will never suffer spiritually in the future. Therefore, be faithful if you should be called on to die now, for you will never die then!

The contrasts couldn't be more vivid. Those who know and love Jesus and remain faithful to him will be granted the "crown of life" (v. 10). They will never, by no means ever (such is the literal force of the double negative in Greek), taste the "second death" (v. 11).

Now, hear me well. ***There is nothing of which I am more deserving than the second death! There is nothing more fitting, more just, more righteous than that I should suffer forever in***

the lake of fire. And the only reason why I won't is that Jesus has endured in himself the judgment it entails. Jesus has exhausted in his own person the wrath of God that I otherwise would have faced in the lake of fire.

As I reflect on that reality I can't help but feel complete dismay at those who reject penal substitutionary atonement, or flippantly (and blasphemously) dismiss it as "cosmic child abuse". ***What hope have we for deliverance from the "second death" if not the suffering of its pains, in our place, by the Son of God?*** If I receive the "crown of life", which I *don't* deserve, in place of the "lake of fire", which I *do* deserve, it can only be for one reason: Jesus Christ, by a marvelous and merciful exchange, has died that I might live, has suffered that I might be set free, has for me faced and felt the wrath of God and absorbed it in himself.

Many today deny that Jesus ever believed in or taught, much less endured in his own person, the reality of hell's torments. What "gospel," then, can they preach? In what does the "good news" consist if not that Jesus has died, the just for the unjust, having "redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13)?

As for the Christians in Smyrna, no sweeter words were ever spoken than these. Tribulation was tolerable, knowing that the "second death" died in the death of Jesus. Slander and imprisonment, yes, even martyrdom, were but "slight momentary affliction" when compared with the "eternal weight of glory" (2 Corinthians 4:17) that is ours because Jesus died and rose again on our behalf.

Yes, thinking about hell and the "second death" has immense practical benefits! In his famous Resolutions, Jonathan Edwards put it succinctly: ***"Resolved, when I feel pain, to think of the pains of martyrdom, and of hell"*** (no. 10).

It is remarkable how tolerable otherwise intolerable things become when we see them in the light of the "second death"! Think often, then, of the pains of hell. Think often of the lake of fire. It puts mere earthly pain in perspective. It puts "tribulation" and "poverty" and "slander" and "imprisonment" and even "death" itself in their proper place. The collective discomfort of all such temporal experience is nothing in comparison with the eternal torment of the "second death" in the "lake of fire."

The one who conquers, said Jesus, "will not be hurt by the second death." Not even when Satan viciously accuses me of sins we all know I've committed? ***No, never, by no means ever*** will I be hurt by the second death. Not even when others remind me of how sinful I still am, falling short of the very standards I loudly preach and proclaim? ***No, never, by no means ever*** will I be hurt by the second death. Not even when my own soul screams in contempt at the depravity of my heart? ***No, never, by no means ever*** will I be hurt by the second death.

And that for one reason only: Jesus, in unfathomable mercy and grace, has suffered hurt by it in my place. So, be faithful, Christian man or woman. Rejoice, oh child of God. And give thanks that you will *never, by no means ever*, suffer harm from the “second death”!