

The Prosperity Gospel in The Revelation

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Revelation 2:8-11

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Several years ago John C. Whitaker, the former United States Undersecretary of the Interior, went fishing in Nova Scotia. He flew into a little town, population of about nine in the summertime and steady around *two* in the winter.

One of those two was an eighty-five-year-old woman named Mildred whom Whitaker had known since he was twelve. On this particular day she invited Whitaker into her kitchen and started asking him questions. They talked for a while, and then she stopped him and said, “Johnny, I’m kind of embarrassed about this, but where *is* Washington?”

When Whitaker realized she really didn’t know, he said, “Mildred, Washington D.C. is where the President of the United States is. Washington is where the power is, where the wealth is.” She said, “Wow! How many people live there?” He said, “About two million.”

She said, “Imagine that. So many people living so far away from everything.”

Where is “everything” and what *is* “everything”?
What *is* wealth and what *is* power?
What *are* riches?

Revelation 2:8: “*And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. . . .’*” To the angel of the church . . .

It’s interesting to note . . . this is important . . . all the letters to the seven churches are addressed to an angel—“Angelos” in Greek. It means “messenger.” It can either refer to a *human* messenger in some instances, or to a *spirit* messenger.

If it is a human messenger, many people have postulated, it would be the pastor or the bishop of the local church. That is interesting because in the case of Smyrna we probably know who that is: a man named Polycarp. We have many of his writings, and it appears that he knew John the Apostle as a very young man.

But it seems most likely, in fact quite certain, that John, because of the way he uses the term, isn’t referring to a human being but a spirit being—an angel, as we call them—charged with the care of a particular church. So although this revelation is a letter that will be read by the church, it appears Jesus is communicating through John to an angelic or spiritual messenger who is then charged with communicating the message of the letter to the congregation.

That’s a wild thought. *How* would this spirit *do* that? As I thought about it I thought . . .

- Ø Probably through things like *Bible studies*. When they read the letter out loud in the congregation, the Spirit might be moving to bring it to life in people's hearts and open their ears.
- Ø Maybe through things like *circumstances* that would happen throughout the week.
- Ø Probably through *prayers* in the congregation . . .
- Ø *Prophecies* spoken in the congregation . . .
- Ø The *spiritual gifts* of the congregation . . . the gifts of the Spirit . . .

Maybe, just maybe . . .

The seven spirits of the seven churches
 Are the seven spirits in front of the throne,
 The seven eyes of the lamb,
 The seven spirits of God,
 Sent out in all the world,
 Seven being the manifold fullness of God;
 Maybe those seven spirits are the *Holy Spirit*—
 the spirit of Jesus.

Then Jesus would be talking to Himself. ***Of course He would know their tribulation and suffering, because He was in them.*** That's just an idea . . . I'm not sure . . . but whatever the case, we do know this: Jesus speaks to His Church as a unit through His Spirit and the gifts He gives to each body.

Each letter has this phrase addressed to the messenger—the angel: “Let those with ears to hear hear what the spirit says to the churches.” Now this is my question to you: How can you hear what the Spirit says to the Church unless you are part of the Church?

I don't just mean membership class. That's important, but I mean every joint with which it is supplied, when knit together, makes for bodily growth.

Bone on bone;
 Meat on meat;
 Sinew, blood,
 Shared pain, joy;
 Vulnerable, life-giving, messy relationships.

That's why Small Groups is the one thing we ask everybody in our church to commit to after worship. A Small Group is quite simply church . . . church in the raw . . . disciples getting together to . . .

- A. Share their lives,
- B. Grow together,

C. Goof off together. (Having fun is one of the requirements.)

So I bet there is an angel assigned to Lookout Mountain Community Church. It also wouldn't surprise me if there is an angel assigned to each Small Group; assigned not by Gretchen but by Jesus. **Maybe even that Spirit is one of the seven manifold spirits of God sent out over all the earth—the very Spirit of Jesus.** But whatever the case, I believe Jesus speaks to me through this church and through my Small Group . . .

- Ø Through Mark, the reasoning skeptic,
- Ø Through D. D., the mystic,
- Ø Through Alan, the lover,
- Ø Through Jennifer, the servant,
- Ø Through Andrew, the evangelist,
- Ø Through Ann, the healer,
- Ø Through Susan, the wife.

And Jesus said, “You will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord.’”

Whenever my Small Group shows up in the name of the Lord, Jesus is there. The question is, do I have eyes to see and ears to hear so that I might say, “Blessed are you, Andrew, who comes in the name of the Lord”?

That's a lot to think about . . .

“To the angel of the church in Smyrna . . .”

We know quite a bit about Smyrna from the writings of Polycarp, from ancient history, and because it's still there. It was a beautiful, well-built, wealthy city with large, glorious boulevards. The most famous of those boulevards was referred to as “The Golden Street.”

If you were a Christian it was very dangerous to walk down that street. Of all the places in the Empire, perhaps Smyrna was the most dangerous place for a Christian to live, for two reasons:

1. In 26 A.D. Smyrna won a contest in order to erect a shrine to the Emperor of Tiberius. It was a center for emperor worship, which eventually became required in the Empire.
2. Smyrna had a very large Jewish population that was influential with the Roman authorities. The Jews were exempt from emperor worship because it was a recognized religion in the Empire. The early church considered themselves Jews—“heirs of the covenant according to faith” . . . that's what Scripture says. But if the Jews by race got sick of the Christians and didn't want them hanging around the synagogue, or if they were intimidated by them, all they had to do was

say to the Roman authorities, “These guys *say* they are Jews, but they’re not.” Then the Christians would be subject to the confiscation of property, torture, and death.

“And to the angel of the church of Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not. They are not Jews but are a synagogue of Satan. . . .’”

Jesus says, “I know your tribulation, I know your poverty, I know the slander that you suffer, and *you* are rich.” It appears they had great spiritual qualities in Smyrna, so we can expect God to bless them. They will be *rich*. In a few paragraphs we will find that Jesus spoke to the church at Philadelphia. Because they had been faithful He says, “I will deliver you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole earth.”

Most American, evangelical Christians believe that God will deliver us from the hour of trial—deliver us, the faithful Church, from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole earth—the Great Tribulation. It’s called the pre-tribulation rapture. They believe God will rescue us from that great trial.

“I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “Plans to prosper you . . .” (Jeremiah 29:11). God’s plan *is* prosperity. God *will* make His faithful Church *rich*. He *will*. Count on it. Next verse . . .

“‘[Smyrna,] do not fear what you are about to suffer. (That sounds strange.) Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you in prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who conquers shall not be hurt by the second death. Be faithful unto death.’”

Do you realize how that one little paragraph messes up an entire sermon on the prosperity gospel!? Do you see what this means?

- Ø Smyrna, of all the churches, was the most together.
- Ø It was the one church—maybe Philadelphia too—that Jesus did not rebuke with a strong rebuke.
- Ø It was probably the most faithful church of all of them.
- Ø And what do they get? More tribulation, poverty, and death.

Hopefully you did notice that Jesus didn’t say, “You’re poor and *going* to be rich,” He said, “You’re poor and *already* rich.”

Do you ever get the idea reading Scripture that we really don’t know what riches are? **If we begin to get an idea of what riches are, then we’re not so sure we want them!** “To him who has, more will be given.” Ouch. Sorry, Smyrna.

I tell you what we'll do! We'll get together in Laodicea, we'll have a slide show . . . potluck dinner . . . we'll show pictures of the suffering and persecution in Smyrna . . . we'll take up an offering, say a prayer, "Oh, Lord, will you please help those poor people . . . those poor Christians in China and Indonesia . . . help those poor people."

But they're *rich*. Who is rich? Who is poor?

Soren Kierkegaard used to tell a story about a very evil thief who would break into jewelry stores, take nothing, but switch all the price tags. That's very evil because it's not about jewels . . . about gold or pearls . . . it's that he *hates* the jewelry store owner and all the customers. What happens then?

Young men give cheap plastic to their brides;
 Poor people clothe themselves
 In diamonds and precious jewels
 And don't even know it.

Over time the cheap stuff will be exposed—burned away by fire or the ravages of time. And the expensive, good stuff will be lost through neglect.

Kierkegaard's point is that maybe this entire world is like that store, where all the price tags have been switched, and we don't know what's valuable. Maybe we are like little kids. Maybe we are born again (there's an idea!) but born again as babies. Babies don't really know what's valuable.

I can picture Coleman's face, his precious little face . . .

 Tears streaming down his face,
 Suffering immensely,
 Dirt caked around his lips,
 Because one more time
 Coleman was being disciplined
 For eating dirt.

He would *eat dirt!* We couldn't get him to stop! **Think of that! A house full of wonderful, rich, nutritious food . . . doors wide open . . . and he's out back eating dirt.**

But, you see, it's not his fault. He inherited the problem. He inherited bad genes from his Aunt Lydia. I remember clearly the summer of 1968 my little sister sitting outside in her diaper with Tupperware she had taken from the kitchen, making little patties out of the fertilizer that my dad had purchased for our new lawn. **Think of it! A house full of rich, nutritious food . . . doors wide open . . . and Lydia's out there eating manure!** Yuck!

Maybe we're like that. Born again, even as babies sticking anything in our mouths . . . an inherited problem, **as if somebody in our family tree once upon a time lived in a place where they could have all the fruit they wanted—the best fruit you could possible ever imagine! All the riches of the world were right there, but what did they do?** They ate from the one tree that was forbidden.

Ever since then, we have been outside eating dirt and bad fruit.

Maybe, just maybe, the Father is saying, "Come inside. I made a way for you. Come back inside. Stop eating dirt." Maybe we really don't know what's good . . . what's rich . . . where everything really is. In Smyrna Jesus said, "You are rich." In Laodicea where *they* say they're rich Jesus says, "You are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked."

What *is* it to be rich? What are riches?

If we take a clue from the text last week, we'll remember that we spoke about Ephesus, thirty-five miles to the south. Remember that Jesus mourned their poverty of first love . . . affectionate love. They had lost that loving feeling. Scholars debate about whether or not Jesus is speaking about their affection toward *God* or their affection toward their *neighbor*.

It's a silly debate. Because the second commandment, love your neighbor, is likened unto the first commandment, love God, and now we find out that God even takes up residence in our neighbor. So loving one is loving the other.

Last week we preached that we are to discipline ourselves in the hope of that treasure, which is first love—affectionate love—brotherly love. So why were they rich in Smyrna?

- Ø Tribulation and poverty do an amazing thing. They expose need.
- Ø And need forces the disciplines of relationship.
- Ø And the disciplines of relationship open the door to treasure . . . love . . . communion . . . the kingdom.

In other words, tribulation and poverty force us to rely on people. People are like a field of dirt that contains treasure. Storms come along and wash away the dirt and expose the treasure.

Several years ago a first grader went on her first day to a newly integrated school at the height of the segregation storm. It must have been in the early 1960's. An anxious mother met her at the door when she came home. "How did everything go, honey?" The little first grader said, "Mommy, a black girl came and sat next to me." The mother in fear and trepidation, trying to stay calm, said to her little daughter, "And what happened?" The little girl said, "We were both so scared we held hands all day."

Precious, buried treasure.

Philip Yancey in one of his books cites a survey that was taken of senior citizens in London. The survey asked them, "What was the happiest period of your life?" Sixty percent answered, "The Blitz." The Blitz was that time during World War II when Nazi planes dropped tons and tons of explosives on the city of London every night.

These people would huddle together in bomb shelters in small groups while all their earthly possessions were burned away with fire from the sky. In those small groups they experienced something . . .

Faith
Hope
The joy and the pain of Love.
They were rich.

You see, the tribulation and the poverty weren't the riches, it was what the tribulation and the poverty *exposed* and *purified*: faith, hope, and love. "Although this world burns away," writes the Apostle Paul, "they will remain."

Faith in Jesus,
Hope in Jesus,
Love that *is* Jesus—
Treasure.

The jewel exposed by the fire,
The gold purified by the furnace,
The treasure exposed by the storm.

Treasure is in people, and it is exposed by suffering.

So do you want to be rich? I hope so. Then join a Small Group. And thank God for firestorms that fall from the sky . . . Nazi bombers. Jesus said, "Trials will come, but woe to him by whom they come."

In Smyrna, the Devil *will* throw them into prison, but *woe* to the Devil. *Woe* to those Nazi bombers. **But glory to the Church.**

You see, even the *Devil* is on a leash held by God. God even uses the *Devil* to expose His riches! Read the book of Job. He uses Satan to expose His riches in Job . . . in people like Joseph, in people like Paul, in people like Peter . . . "Behold, the Devil will sift you like wheat," to produce what? The *wheat*.

He even uses the Devil to expose His glory in Jesus on that cross. Faith, hope, and love.

"Our faith is more precious than gold, which though perishable is tested by fire and will redound to praise, glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus the Christ," writes Peter.

“The crucible is for silver, the furnace for gold, and the Lord tries hearts” (Proverbs 17:3).

To the lukewarm, rich, and very poor church in Laodicia Jesus says, “Buy from me gold, refined by fire, salve to anoint your eyes, that you may be rich.” How did they get gold in Laodicia? The same way they do in Smyrna, I believe: Invite Him in.

The next thing Jesus says to the church at Laodicea is, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. He who hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into him and eat with him, and him with me.” In Laodicea they had just as much treasure as Smyrna; they just weren’t letting Him in. Why? They had no need. (That’s what they said.) They were already rich.

They were blind to the treasure,
Deaf to His voice;
So they would not say,
“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”

They couldn’t see Him. They needed eye salve . . . ointment.

If you want to be rich, join a Small Group (or something like it). Have those kind of relationships in your life and then thank God for the storms that come. Storms wash away dirt. Maybe God is washing away dirt. Maybe God is weaning us from dirt.

At the end of The Revelation there is a very weird picture. It’s the eternal city, the New Jerusalem, which is also a bride. It gets really weird in chapter 21 where it says, “The gates of the city are always open by day, and it is never night there.” They are *always open*.

In the next chapter Jesus says, “Outside are the dogs, the sorcerers, the fornicators, the murderers, the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.” That is, everyone who loves to *eat dirt*. Just think of that picture. Doors *wide open* to riches beyond belief . . .

prime rib,
wine
cream puffs,
rich food,
the Marriage Supper of the Lamb.

They’re outside eating dirt and don’t go in. Why *not?!!* Maybe they don’t *want* to. They *like* eating dirt. Maybe the kingdom in some way is like an acquired taste. So now God in His grace and mercy is weaning us from . . .

dirt and
bad apples and
gold watches and
nice houses and

the riches of this world.

You say, “**Well, what’s *wrong* with gold watches and nice houses and dirt? What’s wrong with them?**” **Nothing! Nothing is wrong with them!** It’s what’s wrong with *us*. For we are addicted to them.

The fruit of the knowledge of good and evil wasn’t bad. How could it be? God had just *made* it. He called it “good.” It was that we *coveted* it and took it. **Gold watches aren’t bad. Gold is not bad.** It’s that we *love* it more than hungry children. **Things and riches of this world aren’t evil in themselves, it’s that we *use* people in order to love *things* instead of using those *things* to love *people*.**

Use dirt to grow food but eat the food.
Use money to grow people and love the people.
Dirt isn’t evil. Fertilizer isn’t evil.
We would all die without it; we just shouldn’t *eat* it!

My son Coleman is now six years old, so on Christmas morning I woke him up before everyone else. I took him downstairs, through the basement, out into the back yard of our new house, and I said, “Coleman . . .” He was excited! . . . Eyes wide with anticipation . . . “Do you see all this dirt? **It’s yours! Chow down!**”

Actually I didn’t do that. Why? Because through my discipline and through his maturation process, Coleman has acquired a taste for . . .

**Prime rib,
 cherry pie,
 and cream puffs;
Electric trains,
 pogo sticks,
 and presents under the tree!**

But don’t you see it would be a living hell if my son Coleman spent all Christmas morning out back eating dirt while his family feasted inside!

Do you know what I would do? I would give up the feast, my kingdom, my house, and I’d go sit in the back yard in the dirt with him until he came inside. And that would *really* be Christmas. You see, this is the point: Now it’s safe to give Coleman dirt. He still *likes* dirt, he just no longer has a desire to *eat* it.

On your Easter morning your Heavenly Father will give you gold. He will say something like this to you: “Church . . . Smyrna . . . remember that street in your town called ‘The Golden Street’? Do you remember how you longed to strut down that street with your head held high but you couldn’t for fear of death? Look—these streets are made of gold, and you own them!”

But, you see, you won’t be looking at the streets;

**You'll be looking at the Lamb that was slain.
You'll look at Him and dance on the streets!**

When you're looking at Him you will possibly have this thought: "Don't I *know* you from somewhere?" And maybe He'll say, "You met me in Smyrna. You acquired a taste for me there."

A couple weeks ago I went to visit John Lowell who is eighty-two. He was in the hospital—St. Anthony's—with serious heart problems, and he had just received some very, very bad medical news an hour before I arrived. He had been alone.

So when I walked in and heard the news, I sat down and said, "John, are you ready to meet Jesus?" And John was still John. He bellowed, "**Oh yeah. He'll heal me or He'll take me home.**" We prayed, and I felt *rich*. What faith! *Jesus*. Treasure in that old, earthen vessel.

I went downstairs because Marsha Hinds from our church was there as well. The night before she had literally been on death's door. When I walked into her room she would not stop talking about The Revelation and about another vision she had and how wonderful Jesus was, and I just sat there thinking, "What hope!" *Jesus*.

About that time we got a call at the office. Michael Chowdry's plane had crashed near Centennial Airport. Michael was the owner of Atlas Airlines and was extremely successful. His wife Linda was one of our elders years ago.

I went to Linda's house. When I saw her, I didn't know *what* to expect because she had just found out she was a widow with two small children. She walked out of her room, saw me, walked right up to me, gave me a big hug, and said, "Oh, Peter, I'm just so thankful to God—so grateful to God—that He let me have Michael for twenty years."

And I had nothing to say. What more *could* I say? Faith, hope, love . . . like *that*? And I felt rich because *Linda* was rich. **I'm not sure she has ever been richer. Jesus looks past all the riches this world sees, and He sees *His* riches.** She was rich.

Smyrna, you are rich—
Not just *have* riches;
Smyrna, you *are* riches.

There is a letter written around 160 A.D. by the church in Smyrna to circulate among the churches in Asia Minor. It recounts for them what had recently happened in Smyrna, of which the church was so grateful. It describes how twelve believers had recently been martyred, eleven scourged and devoured by beasts in the coliseum of Smyrna, and how it was so obvious to them that Christ was with them.

Paul wrote, "All things are yours and you are Christ's and Christ is God's." Where is everything? Tied to a post in Smyrna, suffering.

The letter goes on to describe the death of the twelfth martyr, the eighty-six-year-old bishop of Smyrna, the one who knew John as a young man, the one who no doubt read The Revelation so many times aloud in church. His name was Polycarp. They decided to burn the eighty-six-year-old Polycarp. Jews from the synagogue gathered the wood for the fire . . . tied him to a post . . . he prayed to God thanking God that he was counted worthy to suffer—to share—in the cup of Christ, to be *with* Christ.

When they lit the fire, witnesses say it encompassed Polycarp like a sail in the wind, and it would not consume him. Finally, in desperation, the executioner took a spear and thrust it in Polycarp's side. So much blood came out that it put out the fire. But they said that while those flames raged around him, this was the incredible thing: It appeared not as if his flesh was burning but it appeared "as bread that is baked, or as gold and silver glowing in a furnace."

You see, he *was* gold.
He *was* rich.
Smyrna is *rich*.

Jesus said, "The kingdom is like a treasure, buried in a field, and a man stumbles upon it and sells everything in order to buy the field." **The people of God are that field! If need be, sell everything for them!** And then He said, "The kingdom is like a pearl merchant," (not a *pearl* but a *pearl merchant*) "searching for fine pearls. And when he finds that one pearl of great price, he gives up everything." **He gives up his entire kingdom** in order to get that one pearl.

I believe that Jesus is the pearl merchant, and the Church is His pearl—His inheritance—His riches—His bride.

What *is* a pearl?
Great treasure
wrapped around a wound in an animal.
What is the church?
Faith, hope, and love
wrapped around the wounded body of our Lord.

Smyrna is rich. Revelation 21:21: "And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, transparent as glass." And the city was adorned with twelve jewels. *Twelve!*

"Lord Jesus, we follow in the lineage of the twelve tribes of Israel, and we follow in the lineage of the twelve apostles and the twenty-four elders. Lord Jesus, we pray make us rich for You—

Your pearl,

Your gold purified by fire
Your city decked with jewels,
Your city in which You dwell.

“Make us rich, Jesus. May we be Your prosperity, for You have already made Yourself our prosperity.”

[Song-“Lord You Are More Precious Than Silver”]

“So, Lord Jesus, we thank You, and we have to confess to You, Lord, that maybe for a moment, here and there in worship, we actually *believe* it. And for a moment sometimes I think, ‘Wow! To die for You! What a privilege.’

“Yet, Lord God, we leave this place and go out into a world that constantly tells us lies. It tells us we need a certain kind of soap . . . need a certain kind of car . . . need a certain kind of house, and we believe that crap. We go to our Small Group, and we get bored. We think, ‘They’re weird,’ and we give up.

“Lord Jesus, would you give us that salve You talked to Laodecia about?

- Ø That You would open our eyes and we could see where the real treasures are in this world,
- Ø That we would acquire a taste for You, Jesus,
- Ø That we would touch the people in this room,
- Ø That we would hug them,
- Ø That we would love them,
- Ø That we would help them, even in their time of need,
- Ø That we would acquire a taste for You.

“Lord God, in faith we know that one day the greatest glory will be to sit at Your table and eat the banquet that is spread before us. We can even begin to taste it in this world, so, Lord God, open our eyes and help us see. In the words of the Apostle Paul, would you ‘open the eyes of our hearts that we might know what are the riches of your glorious inheritance in the saints’?

“For a long time, Lord God, that passage confused me. I think I’m beginning to understand it now. They are sitting in my Small Group. In Jesus’ name, we thank you, Lord God. Amen.”

Bonus Church Trivia:

- Ø Who was the Bishop of Smyrna about one hundred years after Polycarp died?
- Ø Answer: His name was Nicholas. We call him “Saint Nicholas.” **Smyrna is rich! They even have Santa Claus!**

God bless you, in Jesus’ name. Amen.