

The Seven Churches of Revelation
Revelation 2:8-11
“Smyrna: The Persecuted Church”

Introduction

Last week in our study, we examined the letter to the Church of Ephesus. The Church there had “lost their first love” (**Rev. 2:4**) and had deteriorated from serving Christ out of devotion, to simply serving out of some dutiful obligation. There is a major difference between duty and devotion. Duty will only take a person so far, but devotion will lead someone to follow even unto death, if necessary. The Church at Smyrna was the devoted kind of congregation. They were so very much in love with Christ that no matter what the devil threw at them, it only caused them to love Jesus more. This is the reason that Smyrna is one of only two churches, out of the Seven Churches of Revelation, for which Christ has not a single rebuke. He offers the poor church only encouragement. The word *Smyrna* is actually derived from the word Myrrh, a resin that comes from a small tree/shrub grown in the middle east. When the resin is extracted and crushed it gives off a sweet smelling fragrance. Myrrh, as you might recall, was one of the gifts from the Magi given to Christ at His birth (**Matthew 2:11**). Myrrh was often used as an embalming agent, and when it was given to Jesus by the wise men, it symbolized the suffering and death that He would endure upon the cross.

Suffering is a perfect word to describe the Church of Smyrna, for they had endured much. Smyrna (modern day Izmir, Turkey) was a coastal city in the Asian Province of the Roman Empire. The city had been established circa 3000 B.C. but was destroyed by the Lydians in 600 B.C. The city was later rebuilt by the Greeks, and by the time of The Roman Empire, Smyrna had pledged its undying loyalty to Rome. So much so, in fact, that the leaders of the city had actually built a temple dedicated to the worship of Rome. Citizens of Smyrna were required to enter the temple at least once a year to offer up a pinch of incense into the fire upon the altar and proclaim “Kaiser Kurios” (Caesar is Lord). Obviously, the Christians who lived in the city could not and would not utter such blasphemy, and therefore, the persecution for refusing to do so was in many cases horrific. In order to work in the Roman society of Smyrna, one was required to be a good law abiding citizen. This would allow a person to join what was known as “the trades” or “the guilds”. Much like the modern labor unions of today, the guilds were organized groups of skilled laborers that were called upon when workers in a particular trade were needed. To be unaffiliated with the guilds was to be unemployed in the city of Smyrna. Simple as that. Because the members of The Church in Smyrna refused to worship Caesar, they were considered to be undesirable “outlaws” in society. Therefore, they were banned from joining the guilds. I have heard many church members in my time use their job as an excuse for not coming to church, or for not serving in the church. In Smyrna, following Christ prevented them from even getting a job, but they followed nonetheless.

When Christ addressed the “angel” (Pastor) of the city in **verse 8**, we actually know who that young man was. His name was Polycarp, and he had been trained to be a pastor by none other than the Apostle John himself. Polycarp was known for his love and devotion to not only his LORD, but his church, and also for those in the city of Smyrna who had treated them all with contempt. Polycarp was a man who truly lived a life of agape love. The church at Smyrna had wholeheartedly followed his example, for Polycarp was a true man of God. He was the angel of Smyrna to whom Jesus declared, **“I know your afflictions, and your poverty - Yet you are rich (verse 9)”**. Jesus wanted the church to know that He had not forsaken them. He knew completely what they were going through, and He would be there with them through all of it. He encouraged them, Do NOT Fear, Do NOT Falter, and You Will NOT Fail.

Do NOT Fear

Jesus begins his letter to Polycarp by reminding the church that He was alive, although He had once been dead (**vs. 8**). He wanted them to remember that no matter how bad they were suffering, He had been there; he had done that; and because He had overcome, they could rest assured that they would as well. He would see to it! He has the power to enable us all to overcome whatever trials we face in this world. If I didn't truly believe that this morning, I would give up preaching forever! Jesus Christ knows exactly what you are going through this morning, and He overcame much worse on that first

Easter Sunday. Take whatever you are dealing with today to Him in prayer. If He can rise from the dead, then He can surely handle your problems... TRUTH! So, have no fear.

There are 365 "Fear nots" in the Bible. That's one for every day of the year. So, take God at His word. He sees what you are facing, and **He will never leave you, nor forsake you (Hebrews 13:5). Cast your cares upon Him, because He cares for you (1 Peter 5:7)**, or as I once heard someone say, "Don't stay up all night worrying. Give it all to God. He's gonna be up all night anyways!" Jesus wanted the church of Smyrna to understand that He "knew" (*eido* in the Greek - meaning to know intimately) all about their "afflictions and their poverty". The word He used for "afflictions" (*Thlipsis*) means to have such weight coming down upon you that you are being crushed by it. The Church of Smyrna was being "crushed" just like the Myrrh for which they were named, and the fragrance going up to God was very pleasing indeed. They were **a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God (Romans 12:1)**.

The word that Christ used for "poverty" (*Ptocheia*) means to be in wretched destitution; to be a beggar, and yet He tells them that they are rich (*plousios*). These are the exact same words that He used to describe the rich man and Lazarus in His parable of **Luke 16:19-31**. You see, God doesn't look at riches by the worlds standards. He measures us by our spiritual wealth. These Christians at Smyrna, who had been banned from the trades and could not find work, these poor Christians who had been forced to worship in caves while their pagan neighbors offered up incense to Caesar and various Roman "gods" in lavish temples, were RICH beyond measure in the eyes of The Only ONE that mattered! Jesus wanted them to know that though they had nothing now, their treasures in Heaven were vast. HE was their shield and very great reward (Genesis 15:1).

Not only were the pagans of Smyrna putting pressure upon the church there, but the local Jewish community had been merciless in their persecution of the tiny church as well. Jews were not required to worship Caesar, for their religion had been recognized as an approved religion of Rome, while Christianity had been deemed a lawless "sect". You would have thought that the Jews of all people would have understood the church's refusal to worship the Roman Emperor, but rather, they constantly stirred up the pagans of Smyrna against the church by spreading false and vicious rumors about church doctrines. The Jews told the people of Smyrna that the Christians were cannibals, because they practice a ritual of eating "the body and the blood" (communion). They also spread stories that the church was sexually immoral, because it's members greeted each other with a "holy kiss" (**Romans 16:6**). Jesus called these vicious Jews, "the Synagogue of Satan" (**vs. 9**) and told the church not to fear the persecutions that were to come. He would have the last word on who was of God and who was not, and these Jews would find themselves in a serious predicament on their day of judgement.

Do NOT Falter

Jesus told the church of Smyrna to "keep the faith" (remain faithful - **vs. 10**), even to the point of dearth, and He would give them a crown of life. Can you imagine just how hard it was for these poor believers to endure the many hardships that they had already suffered? And now, here was their LORD asking them to be patient, for the worst was yet to come! Unlike so many TV preachers these days, God has NEVER promised us that our Christian lives wouldn't be difficult. Christians throughout the world are suffering unspeakable acts of atrocity as we speak this morning simply because they will not deny The LORD Jesus Christ. The church in America sits mostly silent as these things occur in the world around us. We live in luxury, while our brothers and sisters suffer. What should we do about it? I believe that it is the duty of our church to aid those churches around the world who are being persecuted. I think that this is what Jesus wants us to do, how about you? The Smyrnan believers probably had hoped that Jesus would deliver them immediately from their harsh living conditions, but rather He called them to patiently endure. He told them that He would allow their suffering to continue for a set period of time (ten days). This "ten day period" is not to be taken literally, but figuratively. It was a metaphor for a pre-set time allotted By Christ Himself for their suffering. For their persecution was in fact intended for a heavenly purpose. It would bring glory to God.

Ten in the Bible is "the number of testimony". The Lord gave Moses His "testimony" of how we should live upon Mount Sinai. This "testimony" of God is called The Ten Commandments (**Exodus 25:16**). In fact, God commanded Moses to build a special box (ark) to house the Ten Commandments, and He called that box, The Ark of The Testimony (**Exodus 25:22**). We give the Lord a tenth (tithe) of our

earnings. This is our “testimony” that we belong to Him. A Jewish Synagogue could only be established if 10 Jewish families would give testimony to the fact that it should be built. A Jewish wedding required ten Jewish men to witness it and give testimony to its validity. Likewise the Church at Smyrna was to endure a time of intense persecution to give testimony to their faith (for “ten days”). Some would be imprisoned, and some would even give their lives for their testimony of Jesus Christ. They would suffer these things for the glory of God, but The LORD promised that they would not last forever. He didn't offer them an escape. He didn't even promise to make it easier. He simply commanded them to endure it, without faltering in their faith.

I've been a member of a church for pretty much my whole life. I've seen people leave the church in droves over the slightest perceived insult or disagreement. You name it, and I've seen it. “That preacher wouldn't even shake my hand!”, or “Who does that preacher think he is, telling me that what I'm doing is a sin?!” or “I don't NEED this! Im outta here!” Tell me this morning, how do you think that The Church in America would stand up in the face of serious persecution? I'll be perfectly honest with you. I truly believe that we will soon find out. Persecution of the Church is soon coming to America, my friends, and I wonder if The Church worldwide will turn a blind eye to OUR suffering in a similar fashion that we have to theirs? I think it's time that we started looking around and giving aid to those who are suffering today, for tomorrow it may be our turn.

The Church at Smyrna could fully understand what John was describing in the coming days of The Antichrist (**Revelation 13**). He warned that in those days no one would be able to buy, sell, or trade without first paying homage to The Beast (Antichrist) and receiving his mark (**Rev. 13:16-17**). The church at Smyrna had already lived with this reality. They were enduring it as faithfully as they could, but it was a very dark time in deed. I just saw on the news one day this week that over two hundred million Christians worldwide are facing severe persecution. I'm not talking about being made fun of or laughed at. I'm talking about being tortured, imprisoned, and even murdered for their faith. The Greek word for “witness” in the new testament is “*martyrs*” (pronounced *mar-toos*). The word used to mean simply “a witness”, just the same as someone who gives testimony in a trial. This same word has come to mean much more than its original definition, simply because of the early church. We derive our word “martyr” from this word. Why? Because the early church were such “witnesses” for Christ that they willingly laid down their lives to give their testimony of Him. Therefore the word for “witness” in the Greek became synonymous for someone who was willing to die for what they believed in. Allow me to ask you a question this morning. You may say that you believe in Jesus, but are you willing to lay down your life as a witness for Him? That is exactly what He asked the Church of Smyrna to do, and they did it faithfully. They chose to endure. They did NOT Fear, and they did NOT Falter. They loved Him to the very end.

You Will NOT Fail

Approximately 60 years after receiving this letter in Smyrna, long years filled with intense persecution and imprisonment for their faith, Polycarp, the Smyrnan Pastor, was himself arrested at the age of 86 and brought up on charges of treason for his unwillingness to pledge that “Caesar was Lord”. The writings of the early church state that when the soldiers came to the house to arrest Him, Polycarp was waiting for them, for The LORD had warned him in a dream that he would soon have to give his life for his testimony. Polycarp invited the soldiers into the house and prepared a meal for them and talked with them as he would with any friend. It is said that because he was such a kindly old man, that the soldiers actually pleaded with him to whisper “Caesar is Lord” just one time so that they could let him go. For even these hardened soldiers could see the goodness in this old man. Polycarp replied to their urgings, **“For these eighty six years have I served Him, and He never did me any harm; how then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?”** He was taken to the coliseum and burned at the stake, as pagans and Jews cheered his execution. He did NOT Fear, He did NOT Falter, and He did NOT Fail. And one day we will all see him in Heaven wearing the Crown of Life that Jesus promised to give him in this letter to the Church of Smyrna.

The crown, that Jesus promises those who overcome is a “*stephanos*” in the Greek, meaning a “victors crown”. These were the crowns given in those days to the olympic athletes who had competed in the games and emerged victorious. Jesus promises all who will hold fast to their testimony of Him in spite of suffering, that He will give them a victors crown to wear (**vs. 10**). In order to receive a *stephanos*

crown, we must “overcome” (*Nikao* in the Greek). Just this past week I purchased a new pair of tennis shoes. They have a great big check-mark on the side signifying them to be Nike’s. This word is actually pronounced *Nee-Kay*, and it is Greek for “*Victorious*”. Jesus has called His followers to be victorious, to overcome the persecutions and trials of this world and remain loyal to Him out of undying love. He never promised us that following Him would be easy. He never said there wouldn’t be any trials, and tribulations. He never said that everyone would like us. He simply commanded us to LOVE Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Is that how you feel about Christ this morning? Because if it truly is, then you should be willing to risk everything to follow Him, even to the point of being “crushed” in order to become a sweet smelling sacrifice for His glory. Nobody preaches that anymore in this country. I think it is time that we started.

What do you have today that is keeping you from complete devotion to Christ? I beseech you to lay it down upon the altar this morning and surrender your complete allegiance to Him. Let Him become your shield and very great reward. Will you be mocked and ridiculed for it? Probably, but who cares? The Church in Smyrna would have rather been unemployed and meeting in caves, than to live the so called “good life” and deny The Son of God. They were willing to be thrown into prison in hopes of one day feasting in The KING’s palace! They were willing to lay down their very lives in order to receive a *stephanos* crown of eternal life. Who, or what, do you love that much this morning? Fall in love with Jesus Christ. Pledge to Him your undying devotion, and Do NOT Fear, Do NOT Falter, and, YOU will NOT FAIL. He deserves nothing less from us.

Revelation 12:11 speaks of a great multitude of Believers who overcame by the blood of The Lamb and the word of their testimony. I want to take my place among that group of believers.

Who is with me ?

And ALL of GOD’s people said... TRUTH!!!