

Studies in Revelation:
The Message to the Church in Smyrna
2:8-11

This morning we are going to examine the message Jesus sent to the church in Smyrna. If you aren't in Rev. 2:8-11 yet, please turn there now as we consider what Jesus had to say to a church that was suffering. Suffering for the cause of Christ is something that we are unfamiliar with here in America. We know nothing of what it is like to have our property confiscated because we are followers of Christ. Last night before you drifted off to sleep, none of you worried about the possibility of having a mob surround your house in the middle of the night and carry off a family member, just because you are a follower of Christ. How many of you are nervous about going to work tomorrow morning and being fired because you are a Christian? Anyone losing sleep over that possibility? Of course not.

That isn't the way it was 2000 years ago for the church in Smyrna. Smyrna is known as the suffering church. One of the outstanding characteristics of the city of Smyrna was its allegiance to Rome. In 200 B.C., Smyrna was the first city in Asia to build a temple to the goddess Roma, and 170 years later (about 30 B.C.) it beat out ten other cities in Asia for the privilege of building a temple to the Roman emperor Tiberius. So you can see Smyrna had very strong ties to Rome and subsequently, to emperor worship.

Because of its beauty, and prominence in Asia and its close ties to Rome, Smyrna called itself "the first in Asia." Alexander the Great had rebuilt the city in 300 B.C., and the architecture, the layout of the streets, the temples, the acropolis, the harbor, the wealth, and the cozy relationship with Rome made Smyrna the envy of the area, and they were quite proud of that name – "the first of Asia."

Smyrna also had a large Jewish population that was extremely antagonistic to Christianity. This hatred stemmed from the fact that Rome had given the Jews the freedom to practice their religion, and the Jews viewed Christianity as a threat to that freedom. So as emperor worship became more and more pronounced in Smyrna the Jews directed the authority's attention to the Christians to keep the focus of themselves. In fact, it was a Jewish instigated persecution that was responsible for the martyrdom of Polycarp about 60 years after Revelation was written. Polycarp refused to call Caesar "Lord," so he was burned at the stake!

I think it is pretty easy for us to see that the believers in Smyrna were not living in ideal circumstances. Most of these believers lived in deep poverty, not only because they were refused entrance into the trade guilds, but also because they were so generous with what little bit they did have. In addition to their poverty and the persecution from the Jews, they were also under pressure as emperor worship became more and more prominent. The way it worked was that on an annual basis, every citizen had to go to the temple and offer a pinch of incense on an altar to the emperor. That was it. Nothing elaborate. Very little cost involved. And you were good for a year. And it was because of their refusal to do this that they were viewed by the Romans as being unpatriotic at best and treasonous at worst.

So as we think about the situation of this church, it is going to be interesting to see how Jesus refers to himself, as we have in verse 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:"* Jesus calls himself *the first and the last*. This is calling attention to His sovereign control over history. He was present at the beginning of known history, and He will be present when history comes to an end. But there is also a little dig here at the pride of the Smyrnans. They liked to refer to themselves as "the first in Asia," but Jesus is both the first and the last!

He also refers to himself as one *who was dead and has come to life*. This is a reference to Jesus' eternal nature, His power over death and the grave, as we saw a couple of weeks ago when he said he held the keys of death and hades. But there is also a sense of foreboding in Jesus referring to himself like this, which He is going to elaborate on in verse 10.

Then in verse 9, Jesus assures the church that he is aware of what they are going through. From the previous chapter we know that Jesus is standing in the midst of these seven churches, and because of his close proximity he is well aware of their trials. So he says, *I know your tribulation*. That word tribulation could probably be better translated as "pressure," and is a general reference to the distressing circumstances we have already considered. But Jesus mentions two things in particular: their *poverty*, or their financial struggles, and the *blasphemy of the Jews*, which would be their harassment by the Jews of the area. Jesus was well aware of these two sources of pressure.

Now what is interesting about verse 9 where Jesus mentions their *poverty* and the *blasphemy of the Jews* is that Jesus clarifies their circumstances. Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you said, "OK God, what's going on here?" That is what Jesus is addressing here. Remember, the point of apocalyptic literature is to "move the recipient beyond his current situation and into a transcendent reality. The result is a reversal that makes heavenly mysteries real, and the earthly situation temporary." That is precisely what Jesus is doing in this verse as He reminds them that *they are rich*, and that the Jews *are of the synagogue of Satan*. He is reminding that that the wealth and poverty that is important in the scheme of eternal things is in no way connected to financial abundance or lack thereof. This church was destitute financially but rich spiritually, which stands in great contrast to the Laodicean church which was rich financially but destitute spiritually!

And then we see another dose of reality in that it wasn't really the Jews who were responsible for their persecution, it was Satan. The Jewish persecution was just another dimension of Satan's war against God's true people. And what a sad and startling statement this is that these people who thought they were God's chosen people were in reality of the *synagogue of Satan*.

Now when we get to verse 10, Jesus basically tells them that things are going to get worse. "*Do not fear what you are about to suffer.*" In other words, more persecution is on the way. And then this reminder of the real enemy, the ultimate source of the believer's suffering. "*Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days.*" This is apparently a short period of intense persecution that was about to be unleashed against the church. We don't have any historical record of it, but Jesus is warning them their suffering is going to continue. And then we have this cryptic statement, "*be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.*" The implication is that God does not always deliver His children from suffering and persecution. All you have to do is study church history to see the truth of this. As I mentioned several weeks ago, more followers of Christ are going to die for their faith this year than at any previous time in history. The days are not getting better for Christians, they are getting more difficult.

But that isn't a problem for the faithful follower of Christ, because he knows that there is a reward for being faithful until death, and that is *the crown of life*. So what we have in verses 8 – 10 is basically a message of hope for this suffering, persecuted church. The essence of what Jesus is saying is that He had successfully walked the path they have walked and are going to walk. He says, "I died, but I came back to life." He says, "I was persecuted, but I remained faithful." There is nothing that the follower of Christ will ever have to face that Christ hasn't already faced.

And then Jesus ends his message to this suffering church the same way he ends each of them, *“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”* As we saw last week, we are to be “doers of the Word, and not hearers only.” And then Jesus ends this message by saying, *“He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.”* What is the second death? It is described for us in Rev. 21:8. *But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.”* So his point is that if we are faithful to Him, even in the face of persecution and martyrdom, we know our eternity is safe in the presence of Jesus.

What lessons can we learn from this message to the church in Smyrna? The first is that pressure drives us to the Lord. We see a great illustration of this in the book of Nehemiah. In his prayer for his nation, he starts to recount some of the history of Israel, and in 9:26-28 we see this truth that pressure drives us to the Lord.

²⁵ "And they captured fortified cities and a fertile land. They took possession of houses full of every good thing, hewn cisterns, vineyards, olive groves, fruit trees in abundance. So they ate, were filled, and grew fat, and reveled in Thy great goodness. ²⁶ "But they became disobedient and rebelled against Thee, and cast Thy law behind their backs and killed Thy prophets who had admonished them so that they might return to Thee, and they committed great blasphemies. ²⁷ "Therefore Thou didst deliver them into the hand of their oppressors who oppressed them [there is the pressure], But when they cried to Thee [here is the turning to the Lord] in the time of their distress, Thou didst hear from heaven, and according to Thy great compassion Thou didst give them deliverers who delivered them from the hand of their oppressors. ²⁸ "But as soon as they had rest, they did evil again before Thee; Therefore Thou didst abandon them to the hand of their enemies, so that they ruled over them. When they cried again to Thee, Thou didst hear from heaven, and many times Thou didst rescue them according to Thy compassion."

Pressure drives us to the Lord. I can remember coming to prayer meeting one night, and there was a man and wife there who had never once attended prayer meeting

in all the years I had been there. Guess why he was there? Because he had been diagnosed with stomach cancer that day. I remember hearing Linda say one time that “God in His mercy has allowed _____ to get cancer.” What does that mean? How can a diagnosis of cancer be an act of mercy from the Lord? Pressure drives us to the Lord.

The second lesson is that suffering purifies us. I don’t like this truth any more than you do, but that is the reality of the situation. Job states this truth explicitly in Job 23:10, “*When He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold.*” The gold that is dug out of the ground is not the same gold as you have on your finger. It has been melted and purified.

How many of you have noted that there was no negative assessment of this church? There is only one other church like this out of the seven, and it is significant that both of these churches were being persecuted. The way Peter puts it is, “*Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God (1 Pet. 4:1-2).*” Suffering purifies us.

Can you appreciate how radically different this teaching is from the health and wealth philosophy of many televangelists? *Your Best Life Now* may involve pain and adversity and poverty and trials; not mansions, overflowing bank accounts, and low cholesterol levels. Living like a king’s kid may involve very distressing circumstances. The Scriptures have a very well developed theology of suffering. But it isn’t punitive, as the prosperity gospel advocates, it’s redemptive.

So let me remind you this morning that if you are in distressing circumstances, you are in good company! Because Jesus himself says, “I know your tribulation.” God is at

work, and it is a good work He is doing. So the challenge is to hang in there, stay faithful, and see what God is going to do.