

5-14-23 Seven Churches of Revelation (Smyrna)

Revelation 2:8-11.

Why do bad things happen to Christians? Why do evil people seem to prosper? When bad things happen is it because of something I have done wrong? How do I stay faithful, or follow God with all that He allows to happen? I have heard these questions asked many times.

Have you ever thought or felt that way?

Today we are going to witness what Jesus had to say to a church who endure a lot of persecution.

The History (The City of Smyrna)

Smyrna was a proud and beautiful city. Smyrna also had earned the right to be self-governing. It had a large library, stadium, and the largest public theater in Asia. A famous "Golden Street" passed through the city with a temple to Zeus at one end and a temple to a local goddess Sipylene (Cybele) at the other. Other temples to Apollo, Asclepius, and Aphrodite lined the way.

The city had become a center for the cult of emperor worship. Smyrna received permission (over several other cities who requested) to build a temple to the emperor Tiberius in 23 B.C. Under the emperor Domitian (who ruled from A.D. 81 to 96), emperor worship was required for all Roman citizens. Those who refused could receive the death penalty. Once a year, all citizens were required to burn incense on an altar to Caesar, after which they would receive a certificate proving that they had done their civil duty. While this was more an act of political loyalty than a religious act, the citizen had to say, while burning the incense, "Caesar is lord." Many Christians considered this act blasphemous and refused to do it.

In addition to being a center for the imperial cult, Smyrna also had a large Jewish population that opposed the Christians. The church in this city struggled against two groups:

1. Those who supported the emperor worship.
2. Those Jews who strongly opposed Christians. Persecution and suffering were inevitable in that kind of environment.

History tells us that the pastor of this church was Polycarp. Polycarp illustrates the job of a pastor well. The pastor is to love the sheep, convert the goats, and kill the wolves. When that happens there will be challenging times.

Marcus Aurelius, who hated Christians, was a brutal man when it came to the persecution of Christians. Some of the martyrs were made to walk, with their already wounded feet, over thorns, nails, sharp shells, etc. upon their points while others were scourged until their sinews and veins lay bare, and after suffering the most excruciating tortures that could be devised, they were destroyed by the most terrible deaths.

Polycarp had heard that they were looking for him and escaped but was discovered by a child. After the guards that had arrested Polycarp celebrated, Polycarp asked for 1 hour of prayer, which he was given. As he prayed, the guards were so burdened that they repented of what they had done. He was carried before the proconsul, condemned, and burnt in the marketplace. The proconsul offered to release him only if he would denounce Christ.

Polycarp answered, "Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never once wronged me; how then shall I blaspheme my King, who hath saved me?" At the stake to which he was only tied, but not nailed as usual, as he assured them, he should stand immovable, the flames circled his body without touching him; and the executioner, on seeing this, was ordered to pierce him with a sword, when so great a quantity of blood flowed out as extinguished the fire.

Read verses 8-11.

Christ has a very special message for the church that is suffering trouble and persecution, and His message is wrapped up in two titles.

1. Christ says that He is "the First and the Last".

- He is the One supreme authority and ruler over life. There may be governmental officials or people who think they hold authority over life, but they do not. They may claim to be the first and the last to have the final word and authority, but they are deceived. There is only one first and last, only one supreme authority, and that is the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God Himself.

2. Christ says that He is the One who "who was dead, and came to life."

- The word "was" in the Greek means "became". Christ became dead. He experienced death, but death was only a passing thing for Him. He triumphed over it. The tense of the word "alive" in the Greek means a once-for-all act. Once it is done, it is done—completed, finished.

The message to the church at Smyrna is that no matter what they experience, it is a passing episode. Even if they experience death, it has been conquered. Christ has personally been there and triumphed over both pain and death. Therefore, the believer shall live forever even if he is martyred.

I. Commendation.

The church is commended for four things:

1. The church stood tall under great persecution. They remained faithful to Jesus Christ.
2. The church stood tall under great poverty. Most of these believers had been fired from their jobs, their property was taken from them, and they were considered lawbreakers.
3. The church was spiritually wealthy. They were outwardly poor, but inwardly they were rich toward the Lord and His mission. They were faithful to the Lord. They loved Him and one another and even those who opposed them. They ministered to all in need. They studied and taught the Scriptures. They lived righteous and holy lives.
4. The church stood up under all kinds of slander. The slander came especially from the Jews of the city. There was a large community of Jews in Smyrna. We know from historians that they were very prosperous and made large gifts to the arts and to the culture development of the city. As a result, they were influential with the city officials and local Roman government. As stated, it was the Jews who were stirring up so much trouble against the church. But notice what Christ says about the slandering Jews. "They may profess to be Jews, but they are not. They are the synagogue of Satan."

II. Call.

- **“Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer.” (v.10)**
- **“Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison...you may be tested...you will have tribulation...” (v.10).**
- **“Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.” (v.10)**
- Satan was and is the composer of the persecution; wicked men were his instruments (faux Jews).
- There were ten intense periods of persecution by ten Roman emperors. (Estimated 5 million Christians were martyred)

Nero 64-68 (Paul was beheaded under his reign)

Domitian 95-96 (John was exiled during his reign)

Trajan 104-117 (Ignatius was burned at the stake)

Marcus Aurelius 161-180 (Polycarp was martyred)

Severus 200-211

Maximinius 235-237

Decius 250-253

Valerian 257-260

Aurelian 270-275

Diocletian 303-313 (the worst emperor of all)

- Jesus promised a faithful & suffering church more suffering if they stayed faithful (He didn't promise to save them from suffering).
- Jesus has not promised to save us from our sufferings/tribulations either.
- The important thing was and still is faithfulness, standing true to Christ no matter what the government might threaten to do.

James 1:12, Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.

1. **Tribulation is NOT when you get a headache, belly hurts, down in the back, cancer etc.**

- It's the Christian woman whose lost husband gets angry/causes trouble every time she goes to church (TRIBULATION); the student who's ostracized by others because he lives out his faith by saving sex for marriage, choosing to be filled with the Holy Spirit & not alcohol (TRIBULATION).
- **Tribulation is when you suffer in order to serve the Lord.**
- "Pastor, I've never suffered to serve the Lord. I have never been told to keep my beliefs to myself, lost friends, vilified, slandered & lied about."
- Consider that perhaps you're not living enough for/looking like Jesus in your own life.

1 Peter 5:8, Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.

- The devil has plans to bring tribulation to the believer (if you're not living for/looking like Jesus, the devil could care less).
- Suffering, troubles, and tribulation has a way of reminding us of which things in life really matter, forcing us to depend radically on God.
- Ephesus was told to **repent "or else"**; Smyrna was not threatened, but rather promised, **"I will give you a crown of life."**
- The promise matches the **"overcome"** message we'll see in all seven letters to the seven churches.
- A crown was given to the athlete who finished first at the annual games, & Smyrna was a huge part of those games.
- Even if they were martyred, they would immediately go to heaven...wearing a crown.
- The world may call them "poor Christians", but in God's sight they were rich! **"I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich)"**

2. Our blessing for Christ comes out of our faithfulness to Christ.

- Life is not the fleeting years we have here & then 6 feet of earth.
- The believer's life is the period spent here in service of the King, & then the eternal blessing /joy at His side of heaven.
- Promised! Be faithful to Christ & life will be yours.
- Those who are born twice die only once. Those who are born only once will die twice.

3. **Be Like Job!**

- **Job 23.**
- How to continue to trust God, to stay faithful when everything is going wrong.
- Trust God's perspective on your life, your calling.
- Look at Job's heart in **verses 3-9. "Where are you God?"**
- Gideon also questioned God when he faced the Midianites. **(Judges 6:12-14)**
- We might not feel that God is present or at work. We might feel that He is not paying attention or question His decisions. But we **MUST** trust the process that God is doing and stay faithful to Him.
- Trust in God's plan for your life, your calling.
- **Read verse 10.**
- We will be tried...count on it!
- Will we be able to say what Job said in **verses 11-12?**
- **Read verses 13-14.**
- God's plan and purpose need to prevail in our lives.
- God is working His purpose in you to work His purpose through you.
- Satan doesn't want any church, Christian, family, marriage or person to succeed.

Conclusion

Jesus knew that the Smyrna church, He saw them as rich in Him, the world perceived as impoverished.

It's eternally more significant for the Christian to have treasures in heaven than on earth.

Promise of tribulation to the faithful

Promise of blessing to the faithful

I pray you'll know how to find blessing when your heart is being broken.

1 Choice #1: Tribulation is going to be faced with or without fear.

2 Choice #2: Much reward or little reward on God's side of heaven.

What are you doing to be blessed in your brokenness?