

Revelation week 6 ( June 10, 2015)

Smyrna: The Suffering Church

Revelation 2:8-11

I. Introduction

- a. Read
- b. Throughout its history, the seemingly paradoxical truth has been that the more the church has been persecuted, the greater has been its purity and strength.
- c. For decades, churches in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe were oppressed by their atheistic communist governments.
- d. Believers continue to be persecuted in Muslim countries and elsewhere to this day.
  - i. They are forbidden to openly proclaim their faith. Many are imprisoned and some martyred. In the Soviet Union books, even Bibles, were scarce.
  - ii. Yet not only did those churches survive, they prospered. The lifting of the Iron Curtain revealed a powerful, pure church, one characterized by genuine faith, deep spirituality, humility, zeal, love of the truth, and single-minded devotion to the Lord.
- e. Scripture links persecution and spiritual strength. “Consider it all joy, my brethren,” wrote James, “when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:2–4).
  - i. The purest Christian graces are those forged in the furnace of adversity.
  - ii. The church at Smyrna displayed the power and purity that comes from successfully enduring persecution.

- iii. Persecution had purified and purged it from sin and affirmed the reality of its members' faith.
- iv. Hypocrites do not stay to face persecution, because false believers do not want to endure the pain. Trials and persecution strengthen and refine genuine saving faith, but uncover and destroy false faith.
- f. Though they suffered physical hardship and poverty, the Christians at Smyrna clung to their immeasurable spiritual riches.
  - i. Fittingly, the church at Smyrna is one of the two churches (along with Philadelphia) that received no rebuke in its letter from the Lord Jesus Christ.
  - ii. As Scripture makes clear, persecution and trials are an inevitable and essential part of the Christian life (Acts 14:22; 2 Tim. 3:12).
- g. The example of the church at Smyrna instructs all churches on how to properly respond when they come.
- h. Christ's letter of commendation unfolds in six successive stages: the correspondent, the church, the city, the commendation, the command, and the counsel.

## II. **THE CORRESPONDENT.**

- a. 'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life'. (2:8c)
- b. As was customary in ancient letters, the writer identifies Himself at the beginning of the letter, instead of signing His name at the end. The writer identifies Him as the glorified, exalted Lord Jesus Christ described by that phrase in the vision of 1:12–20 (cf. 1:18).
- c. The first and the last is an Old Testament title for God (Isa. 44:6; 48:12; cf. 41:4), and its application here (and in 22:13) to Christ affirms His equality of nature with God.

- d. He is the eternal, infinite God, who already existed when all things were created, and who will continue to exist after they are destroyed.
  - i. Jesus Christ transcends time, space, and the creation.
- e. Yet, amazingly, the eternal God became man and was dead, and has come to life.
- f. Here is a profound mystery: How can the ever-living One who transcends time, space, and history die?
  - i. Peter reveals the answer in 1 Peter 3:18: Christ was “put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.” He died in His incarnate humanness as the perfect sacrifice for sin, but now has come to life (by His resurrection) and lives forever “according to the power of an indestructible life” (Heb. 7:16; cf. Rom. 6:9).
- g. This designation of Christ was to bring comfort to the persecuted believers at Smyrna.
  - i. Knowing that they were undergoing difficult times, Christ was reminding them that He transcends temporal matters, and, through their union with Him, so should they.
  - ii. And should they face death at the hands of their persecutors, beside them is the One who conquered death (Heb. 2:14) and who promised, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die” (John 11:25–26).
  - iii. Jesus Christ also endured the most unjust and severe persecution anyone ever suffered (cf. Heb. 12:3–4), so He can serve as a compassionate and understanding source of power (Heb. 2:17–18; 4:15).
  - iv. He is the One who addressed this letter of comfort and encouragement to the church at Smyrna.

### III. THE CHURCH.

- a. the church in Smyrna (2:8a)
- b. Scripture does not record the founding of the church at Smyrna, nor is the city mentioned in the book of Acts.
- c. All that is revealed about this congregation is contained in this letter.
- d. At the end of the first century, life was difficult and dangerous for the church at Smyrna.
- e. The city, long an ally of Rome, was a hotbed of emperor worship.
- f. Under Emperor Domitian (doe-mission), it became a capital offense to refuse to offer the yearly sacrifice to the emperor.
  - i. Not surprisingly, many Christians faced execution. The most famous of Smyrna's martyrs was Polycarp, executed half a century after John's time.
- g. The Greek word translated "Smyrna" was used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew word for myrrh, a substance used as a perfume for the living (Matt. 2:11) and the dead (John 19:39).
- h. Its association with death perfectly pictures the suffering church at Smyrna.
  - i. Like myrrh, produced by crushing a fragrant plant, the church at Smyrna, crushed by persecution, gave off a fragrant aroma of faithfulness to God.
  - ii. At Smyrna, unlike Ephesus, there was no waning of love for Jesus Christ.
  - iii. Because the believers at Smyrna loved Him, they remained faithful to Him; because of that faithfulness, they were hated; because they were hated, they were persecuted; that persecution in turn incited them to love Christ more.

### IV. THE CITY.

- a. **Smyrna** (2:8b)
- b. Smyrna was an ancient city whose origins are lost in antiquity.
- c. The first Greek settlement dates from about 1000 B.C.
- d. About 600 B.C. Smyrna was destroyed by the Lydians and lay in ruins for more than three centuries until two of Alexander the Great's successors rebuilt the city in 290 B.C.
- e. It was that rebuilt city that was the Smyrna of John's day.
- f. As previously noted, Smyrna was long a staunch ally of Rome.
  - i. In fact, its citizens were so infatuated with Rome that in 195 B.C. they built a temple in which Rome was worshiped.
  - ii. A century later the Roman general Sulla's ill-clad army faced bitter winter weather. When the Roman soldiers' plight was announced in a general assembly of Smyrna's citizens, they reportedly took off their own clothes to send to them.
  - iii. Rome rewarded Smyrna's loyalty by choosing it above all other applicants as the site of a new temple dedicated to the Emperor Tiberius (A.D. 26).
  - iv. And when an earthquake destroyed the city late in the second century, the Emperor Marcus Aurelius rebuilt it.
- g. Although Ephesus and Pergamum equaled or surpassed it in political and economic importance, Smyrna was said to be the most beautiful city in Asia.
  - i. It was located on a gulf of the Aegean Sea and, unlike Ephesus, was blessed with an excellent harbor.
  - ii. Smyrna also profited from its location at the western end of the road that ran through the rich Hermus River valley.

- iii. In addition to the natural beauty of its surroundings, the city itself was well designed.
- iv. It stretched from the bay up the slopes of the Pagos, a large hill covered with temples and other public buildings.
- v. The streets were well laid out, with the outlying ones lined with groves of trees.
- vi. Smyrna most famous street, the “Street of Gold,” curved around the slopes of the Pagos.
- vii. At one end was the temple of Cybele, and at the other the temple of Zeus. In between were the temples of Apollo, Asklepios, and Aphrodite.
- h. Myrna was a noted center of science and medicine. Like Ephesus, it was granted the privilege of being self-governing.
- i. As noted before, Ephesus’s harbor eventually silted up and the city went out of existence.
  - i. Smyrna, however, survived numerous earthquakes and fires and exists today as the Turkish city of Izmir.

## V. **THE COMMENDATION.**

- a. 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, but are a synagogue of Satan. (2:9)
- b. Jesus begins His commendation of those believers by assuring them that He knew their tribulation.
  - i. *Thlipsis* (tribulation) literally means “pressure,” and is the common New Testament word for persecution or tribulation.
  - ii. The church at Smyrna was facing intense pressure because of their faithfulness to Jesus Christ.
- c. There were three reasons for that hostility.

- i. First, Smyrna had been fanatically devoted to Rome for several centuries. Not surprisingly, the city was a leading center for the cult of emperor worship.
  1. The citizens of Smyrna willingly offered the worship that Emperor Domitian was now demanding of his subjects everywhere.
  2. Though the Christians willingly submitted to the emperor's civil authority (cf. Rom. 13:1ff.), they refused to offer sacrifices to him and worship him.
  3. For that refusal they were branded rebels and faced the wrath of the Roman government.
- ii. Second, the Christians refused to participate in pagan religion in general.
  1. Smyrna worshiped an eclectic mix of gods, including Zeus, Apollo, and Aphrodite,.
  2. The Christians' rejection of the pagan pantheon of idols, coupled with their worship of an invisible God, caused them to be denounced as atheists.
  3. Much of Smyrna's social life revolved around pagan worship, and Christians were viewed as antisocial elitists for refusing to participate in it.
- iii. Finally, the believers at Smyrna faced blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of the ultimate blasphemer, Satan.
  1. That shocking statement affirmed that those Jews who hated and rejected Jesus Christ were just as much Satan's followers as pagan idol worshipers (cf. John 8:44).
  2. Jesus' use of the strong term slander or blasphemy, usually reserved for hostile words against God, indicates the slander's wickedness, intensity, and severity.

3. Unbelieving Jews commonly accused Christians of
  - a. cannibalism (based on a misunderstanding of the Lord's Supper),
  - b. Immorality (based on a perversion of the holy kiss with which believers greeted each other; cf. Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5:26),
  - c. Breaking up homes (when one spouse became a Christian and the other did not, it often caused conflict; cf. Luke 12:51–53),
  - d. Atheism (because, as already noted, Christians rejected the pagan pantheon of deities),
  - e. and political disloyalty and rebellion (because Christians refused to offer the required sacrifices to the emperor).
4. Hoping to destroy the Christian faith, some of Smyrna's wealthy, influential Jews reported these blasphemous, false allegations to the Romans.
5. These haters of the gospel were a synagogue of Satan, meaning they assembled to plan their attack on the church, thus doing Satan's will.
6. They may have claimed to be a synagogue of God, but they were just the opposite.
- d. Persecution of the church at Smyrna reached its peak half a century after this letter, with the execution of its aged bishop, Polycarp, in which the unbelieving Jews played a major role.
- e. Though these were by race Jews, they were spiritually pagan. They allied with the Gentile enemies of God in an attempt to stamp out Christianity in Smyrna.



- f. Not only was the Lord aware of the persecution the Smyrna church faced, but also of its poverty.
  - i. In contrast to its synonym *penēs*, which denotes those who struggle to meet their basic needs, *ptocheia* (poverty) describes beggars, who live not by their own labor, but by the alms of others (cf. Richard C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* [reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983], 128–29).
  - ii. Many of the believers at Smyrna were slaves; most were destitute. Those few who had owned possessions had undoubtedly lost them in the persecution.
- g. The church at Smyrna had every reason, humanly speaking, to collapse.
- h. Instead, it remained faithful to its Lord, never (unlike Ephesus) leaving its first love for Him.
  - i. For that reason, Jesus said to them, you are rich.
  - ii. They had what really mattered—salvation, holiness, grace, peace, fellowship, a sympathetic Savior and Comforter.
- i. The church at Smyrna was the rich poor church, in contrast to the church at Laodicea, which was the materially rich but spiritually poor church (cf. 3:17).
- j. The church at Smyrna typifies the spiritual richness of faithful suffering churches throughout history.

## VI. **THE COMMAND.**

- a. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. (2:10a)
- b. After commending them for faithfully enduring persecution, Jesus warned the believers that more was coming.
- c. Before specifying its nature, He commanded them not to fear what they were about to suffer.

- i. He would give them strength to endure it.
  - ii. As He told His disciples in John 16:33, “In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.”
  - iii. Therefore the suffering believers in that flock could say with David, “In God I have put my trust, I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me?” (Ps. 56:11).
- d. Specifically, the Lord predicted that the devil was about to cast some of them into prison.
  - i. God’s purpose in permitting that imprisonment was so that they would be tested.
  - ii. By successfully enduring that trial, they would prove the reality of their faith, be strengthened (cf. 2 Cor. 12:9–10)—and prove once again that Satan cannot destroy genuine saving faith.
- e. The supernatural battle in Smyrna was just one skirmish in the age-long war of Satan against God.
  - i. It has always been Satan’s plan to attack God’s children and attempt to destroy their faith.
  - ii. That is why one of his titles in Scripture is the “accuser of [the] brethren” (12:10).
  - iii. His attacks on God’s true children, however, cannot succeed.
  - iv. Jesus declared, “I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand” (John 10:28–29)
  - v. and “This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day” (John 6:39).

- f. As their Great High Priest, Jesus is also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25).
  - i. In Romans 8:28–29 Paul traces the unbreakable chain from foreknowledge to predestination to effectual calling to justification to glorification; no one is lost along the way. All who are called will be kept until they are made like Christ in glory.
- g. The knowledge that his efforts to destroy saving faith are doomed to failure does not deter Satan from trying.
  - i. His most notable attack on saving faith is recorded in the book of Job, where (with God’s permission) he took from Job his family, possessions, and physical health. All Job was left with was a cantankerous wife and friends whose inept counsel drove him to distraction.
  - ii. But “through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God” (Job 1:22; cf. 2:10).
  - iii. Job’s triumphant declaration, “Though He slay me, I will hope in Him” (Job 13:15), signaled both the triumph of true saving faith and Satan’s utter defeat.
- h. In the New Testament, Satan sought unsuccessfully to destroy Peter’s faith.
  - i. Jesus warned him, “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:31–32).
  - ii. As with the believers at Smyrna, Jesus foretold Satan’s attack on Peter, but also that Peter would successfully endure it.
  - iii. Paul also survived the worst Satan could throw at him:

1. He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor. 12:9–10)
- i. God, who alone sovereignly controls all the circumstances of life, would not permit Satan to torment the Smyrna church for long.
  - i. Jesus promised that they would have tribulation for only ten days. Though some see the ten days as symbolically representing everything from ten periods of persecution under the Romans, to an undetermined period of time, to a time of ten years, there is no exegetical reason to interpret them as anything other than ten actual days.
  - ii. Satan’s major assault on that local church would be intense, but brief.

## VII. THE COUNSEL.

- a. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. <sup>11</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death. (2:10b–11)
- b. As previously noted, Christ has no reprimand for the faithful church at Smyrna.
- c. He closes the letter with some final words of encouraging counsel.
- d. Those who prove the genuineness of their faith by remaining faithful to the Lord until death will receive as their reward the

crown (*stephanos*; the victor's crown) of life (cf. James 1:12).

- i. The crown (reward, culmination, outcome) of genuine saving faith is eternal life, and perseverance proves the genuineness of their faith as they endure suffering.
- ii. The Scriptures teach that true Christians will persevere.
- iii. That biblical truth was understood by the authors of the Westminster Confession of Faith, who wrote "They, whom God has accepted in His Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved."
- iv. That is the unmistakable teaching of Scripture (e.g., Matt. 10:22; 24:13; Mark 4:13–20; John 8:31; Col. 1:21–23; 1 John 2:19).
- e. The phrase He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches closes each of the seven letters.
- f. It stresses the vital significance of what God says in Scripture, and emphasizes believers' responsibility to heed it.
- g. The promise to he who overcomes (all Christians) is that he will not be hurt by the second death.
- h. Though persecuted believers may suffer the first (physical) death, they will never experience the second death (which is not annihilation but conscious, eternal damnation in hell; Rev. 20:14; 21:8).
- i. Not is the strongest negative the Greek language can express.
- j. The persecuted, suffering, yet faithful church at Smyrna stands for all time as an example of those who "have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance" (Luke 8:15).

- k. Because they loyally confessed Him before men, Jesus will confess them before the Father (Matt. 10:32).

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<sup>1</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 67–81.