

“APOCALYPSE SOON”**“Smyrna: The Suffering Church” (Revelation 2:8-11)**

The next epistle was sent to the Church at Smyrna. It is the shortest letter of the seven, but it ministers to the needs of these people. We have no record in the NT of how or when it was formed. Probably, it was planted by the great revival work in Ephesus that spread throughout all of Asia Minor (Acts 19:10). Smyrna was a city just 35 miles north up the coast from Ephesus at the foot of the Aegean Sea. Today this city is called Izmir and it is the 3rd largest city in the land of Turkey.

In the first century, Smyrna was said to be the most beautiful city of Asia Minor as the “crown of Asia.” Alexander the Great wanted to make it a model city and on its coins it bore the inscription “first in Asia in beauty and size.” The city got its name from one of its principle products, a sweet perfume called myrrh. This perfume was obtained by crushing the bark of a flowering myrtle tree. Smyrna was a wealthy city where education, philosophy, and the sciences flourished. It was also a commercial centre, second only to Ephesus in exports. Behind the city on a hill was a street called the “Street of Gold” or “the Crown of Smyrna.” At this scenic spot were beautiful stately buildings and ornate pagan temples, which was shaped to give the appearance of a jeweled crown. This crown symbolized the pride of its citizenry. The grandeur of the idolatrous places of worship must have been sharp in contrast to the simple meeting places of the persecuted church there.

There were other significant facts about this city. Smyrna was a politically astute city. It was marked out as a free city by the Romans with the privilege of self-government and was granted tax-free status because it was unusually devoted in fidelity to the Roman Empire. It won the right over other cities to erect a temple to the goddess Roma and to the spirit of Rome. A large marble statue of Caesar was prominently displayed and every citizen was commanded to annually worship Caesar by publicly offering a pinch of incense there. Any refusal usually led to execution. This threat was heightened, as the Emperor at this time was Domitian who was infamous for his hatred and widespread persecution of Christians. Some historians detail that in Smyrna there were mass executions of Christians who refused to worship Caesar. So Smyrna was not an easy place to be a Christian where annually every believer had to choose between saying, “Jesus is Lord,” or, “Caesar is Lord.”

Another fact of importance concerns the Jews there, who joined in an unholy alliance with the local authorities. The large and influential Jewish community repeatedly incited the local Roman government to attack the Christians. Their hatred of Christ and His people was exceptionally deep. In this letter, Christ will refer to them in particularly strong terms as the “synagogue of Satan.” All apostate churches are ultimately synagogues of Satan.

(1) THE SUFFERING OF THIS CHURCH

Jesus Christ knows every detail of this Church and the society in which they live. Christ introduces Himself as, “*the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive.*” (Revelation 2:8) By such an introduction, Christ is identifying with this suffering church. This is the experiential knowledge of the Master, “*For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin*” (Heb. 4:15). As in the Church in Ephesus,

Christ reveals that He has full knowledge of their difficulties and trials. Sometimes we get to the point that we feel no one cares about our struggles, but even if there is no one else: remember, there is always the Lord. This knowledge should lead us to seek His help at every opportunity, should strengthen our faith, and should give us a determination to endure for His sake. The Church at Smyrna was attacked on a number of fronts:

(i) POLITICALLY – The Roman State was attacking them as Christ mentions their “tribulation” (v9) and imprisonment (v10). This word “*tribulation*” is a Greek word meaning to crush an object such as the squeezing of a grape to extract the juice. The local authorities in Smyrna were relentlessly trying to crush the Church. The Roman historian, Tacitus writes of the typical sufferings of the saints in the Roman Empire under the Emperor Nero in 64 AD,

“First those were seized who confessed that they were Christians. Next, on their information, a vast multitude were convicted, not so much on the charge of burning the city, as of hating the human race. And in their deaths they were also made the subject of sport, for they were covered with the hides of wild beasts and worried to death by dogs, or nailed to crosses or set fire to and when day declined, burned to serve for nocturnal lights. Nero offered his own gardens for the spectacle.”

(ii) RELIGIOUSLY – Like Christ was blasphemed by the Jews, so the Church was also blasphemed by, “*the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan*” (v9). Indeed, the very name “*Satan*” meant the “*Adversary*.” As you read the book of Acts the hatred and persecution of the Christians by the Jews is a dominant theme. All throughout Church history, the greatest persecution against the true Church has come from apostate Judaism and apostate Christianity. Christian historians from this era reveal that the Jews would incite suspicion and hatred of the Christians by arguing: they were guilty of incest because they called each other brother and sister; that they were cannibals because they ate the Lord’s Supper; that they were rebellious as they refused to worship Caesar, and that they were atheists because they refused to recognise the gods of Rome. We see a classic illustration of this in Acts 17 when the Jews in Thessalonica slandered Paul and his followers, “*these all do contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, one Jesus*” (Acts 17:7).

(iii) SATANICALLY – Inciting and empowering the Roman Empire was the Evil Empire of hell. The devil himself personally was assaulting this Church as we read, “*the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried*” (v10). This is another episode in the serpent’s long battle with the Lord Jesus Christ and His people (Gen. 3:15; John 15:18-21). However, this will only last “*ten days*” which emphasizes that Christ is all-knowing and Sovereign of even these events. Just like Job, the devil is given permission to afflict them only to the degree that God permits. Although the devil wants to destroy our faith in a test like this, Christ explains that the trial is allowed for the purpose to test their faith, “*that ye may be tried*” (v10). Such a trial will ultimately produce great character and hope in us, “*And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; And patience, experience; and experience, hope: And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.*” (Romans 5:3-5) We need to constantly remind ourselves that our trials and sufferings are doing something valuable to us.

(iv) ECONOMICALLY – In spite of the great wealth and luxury of the citizens of Smyrna, this Church was suffering economic hardship. Christ acknowledges their “*poverty*” (v9). This Greek word is a strong one, which means absolute poverty or complete destitution. Doubtless, they suffered this because of their stand for Christ. Paul speaks of believers like this, “*For ye had*

compassion of me in my bonds, and took joyfully the spoiling of your goods, knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance” (Hebrews 10:34). These people did not suffer poverty because they were out of the will of God, but because they were in it!

(2) THE SUSTAINING OF THIS CHURCH

The Lord has only positive things to say about this church. As He does not point out any failure, then we surmise that their suffering is not a consequence of their sin. This Church is facing incredible pressure and difficulties. It is not easy to stand up to intimidation and humiliation. Nor is it easy to live a life of toil and poverty with the threat of imprisonment or death hanging over you constantly. We can only but imagine the anxiety of parents as they looked at their children in such a scenario. None of us easily embrace such as a calling. The Lord writes this message to comfort them. What is important to note is not just what Christ says, but also what He does not say. Christ does not promise this is easy neither does He assure them there is a way to avoid the pressure. In fact, He promises them that it will get worse, *“the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death.”* (v10)

However, Christ speaks wonderful comforting words to them. He speaks to them of:

(i) PERSONAL IDENTIFICATION - In v9, Christ identifies Himself with them in suffering and assures them that *“I know”* their sufferings. When Saul of Tarsus launched his violent and vicious campaign against the Church, the Master identified with His people and warned, *“I am Jesus whom thou persecutest”* (Acts 9:5). Jesus Christ knew what it was to be poor, hated, falsely accused, physically harmed, spat upon, and put to death. Indeed, no one suffered more unjustly or more deeply than Jesus Christ. Our great Leader has gone before us in every trial of life and conquered it all. As someone once said, *“there is no pit so deep that Christ is not deeper still.”*

The Master then exhorts them to not be overcome with trial, *“Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer”* and *“be thou faithful unto death.”* As the One *“which was dead, and is alive”* Christ had conquered death so He can assure them not to fear even that. He is Sovereign and they need to recognise that He is in control of this trial. Sometimes the fear of a trial can lead us to back away before it is even realized. John Walvoord comments, *“They had nothing really to fear in this persecution because it could not rob them of their priceless eternal blessings in Christ. In any case they were in the hands of God. Whatever was permitted was by His wise design.”* In the same manner, the truth is the same for us today. Jesus knows the struggles that we are having right now. He is aware of the dark valleys we are going through and identifies with us.

(ii) TRUE WEALTH - Physically they were destitute in material things, but Christ states, *“but thou art rich”* (v9). They had something no money could buy as they were *“rich toward God”* and *“rich in faith”* and *“rich in good works,”* with *“treasure in heaven”* (Luke 12:21; James 2:5; 1 Timothy 6:18; Matthew 6:20). They were like the apostle, *“as having nothing, and yet possessing all things”* (2 Corinthians 6:10). It is not always the wealthy church materially that truly is the spiritually rich church. They were rich in what really matters unlike the Church at Laodicea (3:17) or even their persecutors in Smyrna.

Often we feel sorry for persecuted Christians in countries like China when we read of them losing their homes and possessions, yet it is us who are truly poor. Sadly, too many of us

would prefer to be rich materially and poor spiritually. We would fit more comfortably into the Church at Laodicea than at Smyrna! I like the way one writer captured this truth in a poem,

**I counted dollars while God counted crosses.
I counted gain while He counted losses.
I counted my worth by the things gained in store,
But he sized me up by the scars that I bore.
I coveted honors, and sought for degrees.
He wept as He counted the hours on my knees.
I never knew till one day by a grave,
How vain are the things that we spend life to save.
I did not yet know, 'til a Friend from above,
Said, richest is he who is rich in God's love!**

(iii) PRIZE AHEAD – Smyrna may have been known as “the crown of Asia,” but here the Lord offers a greater crown - the “*crown of life*.” (v10) From the crucible of tribulation they shall have their triumph. This crown is not temporal like earth’s crowns, but this one is eternal. As Paul tells us, “*For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory*” (2 Cor. 4:17). Christ reminds them at the beginning of this letter that He is “*the first and the last*” (v8). He can promise eternal things because He is the Eternal Son of God.

(iv) PROMISE – Christ makes them this promise, “*He that over-cometh shall not be hurt of the second death*” (v11). The saints of God at Smyrna can fearlessly face up to the first death without fear because the second death has lost its power over them. (Rev. 20:14). They may be slandered in Smyrna, but they are the jewels of heaven. All the people of Smyrna will have to face death, but only the saints who trust in Christ will find the second abolished. These suffering saints may only have Christ, but in the troubles of life that is all they needed. As Alexander Maclaren points out, “Whatever else we lose, as long as we have Him we are rich; and whatever else we possess, we are poor as long as we have not Him. God is enough; whatever else may go.”

CONCLUSION

This Church at Smyrna lived on the edge of eternity each day. Doubtless, the words to them by Christ encouraged the aged exile John on the Isle of Patmos, as he suffered there for the sake of the Gospel. However, the Holy Spirit also applies this to us today by declaring, “*He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches*” (v11). For all of us will face some measure of persecution, “*Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution*” (2 Tim. 3:12). Yet, despite their trials this Church held fast to the faith. As MacArthur points out,

“They were poor because of their faith. They had been robbed and plundered, slandered, accused, and imprisoned. This church had every human reason to collapse, did it not? Every human reason. Every human reason to say, “Who needs this religion? We’ll try another one.” But they didn’t. They just leaned all the more on Jesus Christ and they never lost their first love.”

Persecution has a way of purifying the Church and it is noteworthy that Christ has no word of rebuke for this church. The name Smyrna is especially fitting as it reminds us that the beautiful fragrance of the perfume is only released after the myrrh plant is crushed. As this Church was crushed by the persecution, it gave off a beautiful fragrance of Christ to the world around it. They were participating in the *"fellowship of His sufferings."* (Philip. 3:10) Campbell Morgan has a wonderful comment about this,

Now let us mark the commendation. First the silence, and what can be said concerning silence. It is more eloquent than all language. He has no word of complaint to utter. The character and conduct of the church at Smyrna was such as perfectly to satisfy the heart of the Lord, and how wonderful it is when we remember that tribulation and poverty and reviling make more terrible demands than any other circumstances upon the spirit of those passing through it. There is no profounder proof of grace of character than that of being able to suffer wrongfully and yet to manifest a gracious spirit. How often have we all fallen at that very point. Repeatedly in the midst of suffering for righteousness sake, we have manifested unrightness of character and of conduct. Is not that the whole story of the failure of God's wonderful servant Moses? "He spake unadvisedly with his lips." And yet the people were doing wrong. There was no possible defence of their action, but in the presence of their wrong-doing he did wrong, in that he manifested a provoked spirit. Christ watched these saints at Smyrna, persecuted, beggared, vilified, and yet had no fault to find with them. Their spirit under tribulation was such as to satisfy the heart of Christ. The finer graces of the Christian character are only revealed under bruising and pressure, as the fragrance of fine spices is only obtained through crushing.

Church history testifies that this church remained steadfast. Typical of the leaders of Smyrna was one of the early church fathers and friends of the Apostle John called Polycarp. He was the pastor of the Church in Smyrna not long after the book of Revelation was written. When he was 86 years old Polycarp was tried and triumphantly martyred. Church historian Ignatius records this stirring account in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*,

"But when the magistrate pressed him hard and said, 'Swear the oath, and I will release thee; revile the Christ,' Polycarp said, 'Fourscore and six years have I been His servant, and He hath done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?'But on his persisting again and saying, 'Swear by the genius of Caesar,' he answered, 'If thou supposest vainly that I will swear by the genius of Caesar, as thou sayest, and feignest that thou art ignorant who I am, hear thou plainly, I am a Christian. But if thou wouldest learn the doctrine of Christianity, assign a day and give me a hearing.'Whereupon the proconsul said; 'I have wild beasts here and I will throw thee to them, except thou repent'. But he said, 'Call for them: for the repentance from better to worse is a change not permitted to us; but it is a noble thing to change from untowardness to righteousness.' Then he said to him again, 'I will cause thee to be consumed by fire, if thou despisest the wild beasts, unless thou repent.' But Polycarp said; "Thou threatenest that fire which burneth for a season and after a little while is quenched: for thou art ignorant of the fire of the future judgment and eternal punishment, which is reserved for the ungodly. But why delayest thou? Come, do what thou wilt."

Every Christian is called to be faithful unto death when or how that death comes. It may be by martyrdom or it may be by natural causes. **The critical thing is not *if* we die, but *how* we die?** Believer: Are you an overcomer? Are you confident that you will escape the second death? If you are under the load of sufferings and trials today, take heart – Jesus knows all about it and sympathizes. It may even get worse, but take heart that the cross you are called to bear is never greater than His grace to endure.