

Revelation 2:8-11

Sunday, July 19, 2020

In this study we learn from Jesus' message to the persecuted in Smyrna.

I'm sure you know that persecution still takes place today, as it has throughout history, over 70 million Christians have been martyred since the birth of Christianity – and it's still happening around the world, the numbers are up to 90,000 each year, 1 person every 6 minutes is murdered for being a Christian! Besides that, 200 million will be arrested, tortured, beaten...or jailed...this year, just for being a Christian.

The most common sources of persecution are Marxism, Radical Islam, and as times continue to darken, the Culture of the day.

The forms of persecution, again, are murder, imprisonment, torture, forced conversions, destruction of personal property, restrictions on churches, as well as educational and job discrimination.

Today for example, Christians in India have experienced a massive outpouring of cultural persecution. In southern India, many communities rely on fishing for a sustainable living. **Collective** fishing is a common practice, which requires village members to share boats. Unfortunately, Hindus have denied Christians access to these communal village boats. This social boycott has left thousands of Christians in crisis and deprived them of their sole source of income.

So...pray for them, and yet sometimes, I feel like it would be better if they prayed for us - for the results of persecution definitely cause pain, but they also bring power, and purity, and **Spiritual** prosperity, when we go through trials with our eyes on the Lord, we'll grow, to Christian maturity. We'll even see that beautifully illustrated in our study today, of the Saints in Smyrna.

It's why James wrote **James 1:2-3**, "2 My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience."

I. The Christians (8a)

A. Leadership

Angel = messenger; as I shared last week, the context seems to indicate that this message was to be given to-and-through the pastor of the church; the teachers of the people were/are to spread the word - so personal to each church.

Pastors and leaders are so accountable to heed **His** Word, and then feed, and lead **His** flock; we're not manufacturers, we are distributors...as Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 11:23a**, "For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you..."

B. Fellowship

Smyrna was an Ionian city in Asia minor, on the Aegean Sea, 40 miles north of Ephesus, it would be next on the postal route, after Ephesus.

It's interesting to note the sequence of studies, for we all know that the first true mark of a living church is what we studied last week – love – but undoubtedly the second significant sign, or even **test** of salvation is suffering, not only because a Christian who loves the Lord becomes a target of the enemy, but because a willingness to suffer for Christ proves the genuineness of that love, and our faith in Christ.

We'll see in our study of this passage how Smyrna seriously suffered for their Savior.

From a Biblical perspective, Smyrna is a completely different scenario than Ephesus, in that we have no other information on this church, other than what we have here in Revelation 2.

According to **tradition**, the church was founded by Paul the Apostle, sometime during his 3rd Missionary Journey.

According to **history**, the city of Smyrna was very prominent, known as the "Pride of Asia" back then.

It had a beautiful, natural harbor, as well as many roads to Rome, that contributed to the sales and success of the city.

It's **such** a great location that it survives even today, now known as Izmir, the 3rd largest city in the nation of Turkey, with a population of close to 3 million; it was known as Smyrna until 1930, when the Turkish title replaced its Greek original name.

Smyrna, was not just prominent, however, it was also very pagan, loyal to Rome, home to a temple dedicated to the Emperor Tiberius, in A.D. 26...and over time a Temple was even built in Smyrna to worship Rome herself!

This offers us insight into why the Christians suffered so much (they were considered atheists, non-loyalists, cannibals)

Jesus sends a message to them:

II. The Christ

A. Who He is

1. The First and the Last

The First and the Last and everything in between; both originator and terminator. Jesus wanted the saints in Smyrna to know that He was not only the Communicator of this Word, He was and is the Creator of the world.

Isaiah 44:6, "Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: 'I am the First and I am the Last; besides Me there is no God.'"

When it comes to God, there can't be 2 firsts and lasts! This is clearly a claim to deity.

Isaiah 48:12, "Listen to Me, O Jacob, And Israel, My called: I am He, I am the First, I am also the Last."

2. He who was Dead and came to Life again

This was necessary for this church to know, because they soon would be facing death and they needed to know that He Himself had conquered it and with Him in their corner, with Jesus in their hearts, they had nothing to fear. (see also 2 Timothy 1:7; 1 John 4:18)

Suffering and even death for us as Jesus' disciples is not gloom and doom, it's not decease, it's not destruction, it's simply a departure.

Remember Jesus' words to Martha? **John 11:25**, "Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live.'"

B. What He knows

1. He knows them

i. Works

Jesus said, I see, I know, your good deeds; that with you it's not just words, it's works, how you work hard for me, I see, how you put your faith in action.

ii. Tribulation

Here's the heartbeat of this church.

And sometimes it's just good to know...that God knows. He sees. Sometimes I think we're like Jacob and we don't think God sees.

We read those words in **Isaiah 40:27-28**, "²⁷ Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel: 'My way is hidden from the Lord, and my just claim is passed over by my God?' ²⁸ Have you not known? Have you not heard? The everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, neither faints nor is weary. His understanding is unsearchable."

Or as one translation puts it, "He knows everything, inside and out." Does it help to know that the Lord knows...He's there and aware of everything?

That He not only knows, He numbers. We see that caring combination in **Psalm 56:8**, "You number my wanderings; put my tears into Your bottle; are they not in Your book?"

Jesus said, "I know...your tribulation."

The Greek word translated "Tribulation" (*thlipsis*) primarily speaks of a pressing, a pressure. It's those things that burden our spirits - and there are different types of sufferings and afflictions, the pains of our body, the anguish of mind.

Some Christians, like the church in Smyrna are in the "pressure-cooker."

It's not as if we weren't warned, it's a promise of Jesus (John 16:33) a truth told to us by Paul (Acts 14:22).

1 Thessalonians 3:4, "For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened, and you know."

2 Timothy 3:12, "Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution."

The Church in Smyrna was working hard for their Savior; they were therefore attacked by Satan. No doubt one of the results what we read next:

iii. Poverty

They no doubt experienced what the Jews did in Nazi Germany in the 1930's, when travel for the Jew was restricted, their shops and businesses were subject to frequent vandalism and looting...in that sense livelihoods were destroyed. Places of worship with defiled, property seized, humiliated, stigmatized, hassled, and assaulted. That led up to the eventual genocide, when 6 million Jews were exterminated.

But before they were slaughtered, they were impoverished.

In the Bible there are primarily 2 Greek words for poverty, 1 refers to a simple struggle to make ends meet - that's not the word used here. The Greek word used here describes the homeless beggar, destitute, and often-times reduced to slavery. **That**, was the condition of the saints in Smyrna.

The Lord knew they're works, which led to their tribulation, which led to their poverty, which led to their:

iv. Wealth

"...but you are rich." How? You have the Lord.

You may be suffering in an aspect of misery; you may not have a lot of any money, and the things that money can buy. People may judge you, look down on you, feel sorry for you.

But Jesus say, "I love you; I love the way you haven't quit; the world doesn't know it, and you might not know it, but I want you to know it...you are rich.

(see also Ephesians 1:7, 18; 2:4, 4; 3:8)

(Contrast Revelation 3:17)

"Let now the poor, stand and confess, that my portion is Him, and I'm more than blessed." - Savior King, by Hillsong

2. He knew their enemy (9b)

The blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not. The Greek word comes to us from the word *blapto*, "to injure," and *pheme*, "speech," it refers to speech that would defame the Divine Majesty.

These were people persecuting the church of Smyrna, they were fake Jews, some say even fake Christians (Romans 2:28-29), blaspheming the Lord, and/or maybe even blaspheming them.

The NIV translates that word "blasphemy" as slander; it is very probable that all that persecution began with a smear-campaign in Smyrna. (the title of Devil literally means slanderer)

Ultimately these counterfeits were only Synagogues of Satan.

3. He knew their future

Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation 10 days. (some say the # 10 has to do with man's perfection - others attribute it to law - 10 Commandments)

(Not authored by God, but allowed, for our good) (Romans 8:18)

Job 13:15a, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him."

VI. The Counsel (10a, 10c 11a)

A. Do not fear

B. Be faithful until death

C. Listen to the Holy Spirit

VII. The Crown (10c, 11b)

A. Of Life

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."

B. Means we won't be hurt by the Second Death

(see Revelation 20:14; 21:8)

The celebrated Polycarp, a pupil of the apostle John, and Bishop of Smyrna was martyred 50 years after this letter was written, in A.D. 155. His life and death epitomize the cross and crown of the Christians of Smyrna.

Have you placed your faith in Jesus? If not, I pray you'd do that now, that you'd receive this crown and not be hurt by the second death.