

Revelation: Because the Time Is Near

Study #4: The Letter to the Church in Smyrna

One of the best stories about John Wesley involves his expectation of persecution. One day he was riding along when it suddenly dawned on him that three days had passed without an egg or brick being tossed at him. But instead of than being happy about it, he worried. He slid down off his horse, knelt on the ground, and began to pray, "Lord, what's wrong with me? Am I backslidden?" And for several minutes, he asked the Lord to show him the reason for his lack of suffering. Just then, an irreligious fellow looked over the hedge and spied the preacher praying. Recognizing him, the irreligious fellow said to himself, "I'll fix that Methodist preacher!" and picked up a brick and threw it at him. The brick missed its mark and fell harmlessly to the ground. But Wesley saw it and leaped to his feet with joy. "Praise God!" he shouted. "It's all right. I still have His presence."

You may wonder, "Was Wesley crazy or just an old fool?" The answer is neither. He was simply taking literally what Jesus told us from the beginning. John 15:20, "No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you." 2 Timothy 3:12 repeats the warning, "All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."

Today one of the big debates among Christians is the Tribulation. Will the church remain on earth and go through the Great Tribulation? That's a question that we will address in Revelation chapter 3. But regardless of the position you take regarding the Tribulation, there is one issue on which all Christians can agree. Every church and every Christian will go through some tribulation. The enemy of our souls will not be content to let us serve Christ without some sort of opposition. If he can stop us through official persecution, he will do it. And if the Lord does not return soon, we in the West may begin to face a degree of persecution we have never experienced before. But even when that avenue isn't open to him, he finds other ways to hurt us—personal insults and injustices, rejection by family and friends, financial disasters, mental and physical disorders. Satan never ceases in his search for something to weaken our faith and destroy our effectiveness for Christ.

But as great as his opposition is, let's not forget. God has a purpose and a victory in our suffering. Jesus said in John 16:33, "In the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." One of the best examples is found in Revelation 2:8-11 where we meet the church of Smyrna, who suffered intensely for Christ. But they did it to the glory of God, providing a timeless example that we can follow today.

By the way, I failed to mention something significant when we began our study of the churches. But I want to mention it now because, as you'll see shortly, it becomes very important in the study of this letter. The seven letters to the seven churches follow a common pattern. First, the destination of the letter is given along with a description of Christ which is intended to encourage them or warn them. Next a commendation is given citing the good deeds of the

church, followed by a word of correction from Jesus. Finally, each letter closes with an exhortation and a promise of blessing to those who hear and obey it. But as we study the church in Smyrna, one of these features is intentionally missing. There is not one word of correction. Let's learn why as we look at several key factors about this city. They will help us understand what is said in the rest of the letter.

1. City

The letter begins, "To the angel of the church in Smyrna write." Historians report three facts about this city. First, its beauty. The Romans called it the "ornament of Asia." For it boasted the safest, most beautiful harbor of its day and was an excellent example of city planning, laid out according to the specifications of its founder, Alexander the Great.

Second, it was a Roman city. Even though it was located 500 miles from Italy, Smyrna was infatuated with Rome, so much so that even before Rome became a super-power, they erected a temple in its honor at the center of their city. Later, due to their loyalty in war, Caesar also made it a free city, granting Smyrna all the rights and privileges of Roman citizenship. This was then followed by an even greater honor. In 26 AD, Smyrna was chosen as the site for a new temple in honor of Tiberius Caesar. This not only deepened their devotion to Rome, it also made it a center of emperor worship. This delighted all but the Christians in Smyrna, for now the choice before them was: Worship Caesar or suffer.

But the most striking thing about the city was its name. The word "Smyrna" means myrrh—a spice used as an embalming agent and as an anesthetic for pain. As such, it became a symbol and synonym for suffering. For example, when Jesus suffered on the Cross, it was myrrh He was offered to drink, and it was myrrh that was used in preparing His body for burial. It is fitting, then, that the suffering church of Asia should be found in the city of myrrh. In fact, what is interesting about myrrh is that it has to be crushed to give off an odor. And the more it is crushed, the sweeter its odor becomes. That was the experience of the Smyrnans. God let the devil crush them, but the more he crushed them, the sweeter their testimony became. I pray the same will be said of us when we go through trial or persecution.

2. Comfort

Notice also how fitting the description of Christ is in verse 8: "These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life." "First and the Last" refers to His eternity, reminding us that nothing catches Him by surprise. Whatever hardships or heartaches lie ahead of us, He has already previewed them and made sure they all work together for our good. (Rom. 8:28) Remember that was you await that medical biopsy, make that pivotal career decision, or pray for that long-awaited need. Remember that "the eternal God is our refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms?" (Deut. 33:27)

“Was dead and came to life” is, on the other hand, a reference to His resurrection and the reason He can say to us in verse 10, “Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer.” Why needn’t we fear? Because regardless of what we suffer in this life, Jesus promises that we will live forever, “Because I live, you will live also.” (John 14:19)

Several years ago, an ocean liner called the Empress of Ireland sank. On board were 130 Salvation Army officers, only 21 of whom survived, very few compared to the number of people on board the ship. Many wondered, “Why would God let so many of His children die?” When they examined their bodies, they learned why. Not one of those who drowned was wearing a life preserver! When interviewing the survivors, they said that when these brave souls saw there weren’t enough lifejackets to go around, they took theirs off and strapped them onto others saying, “It’s OK. I can afford to die. I know Jesus.”

Do you? Are you a follower of Jesus? Then you don’t need to worry about the future, because no matter what you suffer here, you’re going to live forever. And not only live forever, Jesus promised that whatever we give up for Him in this life—friends, family, or possessions—will be more than made up for in the life to come. What a comfort to those suffering saints in Smyrna. Now listen to His commendation of the Smyrnans.

3. Commendation

In each of the letters to the churches, Jesus begins His commendation with the statement, “I know your works.” But in comforting the Smyrnans, He adds, “I also know your suffering.” That’s true, isn’t it? As the old hymn puts it—

Jesus knows all about our struggles, He will guide till the day is done; There's not a friend like the lowly Jesus—No, not one! No, not one!

First, He says, “I know your tribulation.” There are many words for tribulation in the Bible. This one means “pressure from without,” referring not to physical illness or emotional stress, but to physical persecution from the world. Think of the torture of the first Christians—flogging, prison, mauled by lions in the arena, lit as torches in Nero’s garden, beheading by the sword. Yet Jesus says, “Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven.”

Next He says, “I know your poverty.” The word means “destitute.” As victims of the “ten percenters,” the Smyrnans gave up everything for Christ. Roman law stated that when someone was turned in for being a Christian, 90% of the victim’s property went to the government, but 10% was awarded to the informant as a reward, leaving the Christians absolutely destitute. And yet, Jesus could say to them in verse 9, “You are rich!”

How could that be? How can a person be both rich and poor? Because God’s definition of riches is radically different from that of the world. For example, there are many in today’s Christian culture who will tell you that if you have enough faith and you’re in God’s will, you will never be sick or impoverished. God always wants His children to be healthy and wealthy. But I can tell

you without apology that those who say such things know nothing about the Kingdom of God. As James corrected his readers, “Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?” (James 2:5) The truth is that God frequently lets His children go through lean times. Not because He doesn’t love us, but because He wants us to experience first and foremost of all the richness of knowing Him.

This reminds me of the Thomas Aquinas’ visit to the holy city of Rome. While there, the pope took him on a tour of the papal treasures. Smiling proudly, the pope said, “So, you see, Thomas, no longer can we say like Peter, ‘Silver and gold have I none.’” To which the great man replied, “No, and neither can we say, ‘In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise and walk.’” You see, as American believers, we are rich when it comes to creature comforts, but I wonder, how wealthy are we when it comes to knowing God?

Third, He says, “I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.” In Smyrna there was a large Jewish population who claimed to love God, but rejected Jesus His Messiah and did everything in their power to destroy His church. For example, when Polycarp the pastor of this church was sentenced to be burned at the stake, history records that it was the Jews who stacked the wood for the fire.

Does this mean all Jews are Christ-killers and deserving of our contempt? By no means! Paul reminds us in Romans 11 that the Jews are still the apple of God’s eye and that one day all Israel will be saved. Therefore, whoever curses them will be cursed himself. Still, the Bible is clear that the greatest enemies of the saints are often religious themselves—Cain, Caiaphas, the Inquisitors. That has been the devil’s strategy from the beginning. He uses religion and religious people to discredit and persecute the people of God.

4. Courage

So for what did Jesus correct the church at Smyrna? He didn’t. Unlike the other churches, the outstanding feature of this letter is they needed no correction. For one of the benefits of persecution is that those who have suffered for Christ normally demonstrate a deeper purity and loyalty to Christ than those who are comfortable in their faith. 1 Peter 4:1 talks about this, “Therefore, since Christ has suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin.” Is Peter saying that those who suffer physically reach a state of sinless perfection in which they are no longer susceptible to sin? No. He is reminding that suffering can, if we let it, purify our values, break our infatuation with the world, and deepen our love for Jesus.

Hal Lindsey described a conversation with a European Christian who made frequent trips behind the Iron Curtain prior to the fall of communism. This believer witnessed amazing examples of faith and devotion to Christ. He added, “One church that was undergoing

considerable persecution said they were praying for God to send persecution upon their Western brothers, so that they too might be purified." That's a little unsettling, isn't it? To realize that God may be answering their prayers even now, as we experience more and more opposition in our country. But let's not forget that suffering can be a blessing if it purifies and intensifies our love for God.

Corrie Ten Boom talked about this in one of her books. She told about a group of Russian believers meeting behind closed doors. Suddenly two soldiers burst into the room with machine guns, giving the believers five minutes to renounce their faith and leave, or they would be shot on the spot. A few fearfully got up and left. Then the soldiers walked to the door, locked it, and announced, "We're believers too! But we can't risk worshiping with anyone who isn't totally committed to Christ. May we join your fellowship?"

Jesus did not correct the church at Smyrna. He encouraged them. First, He said to them, "Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days." Let's see what we can learn about suffering from the Savior's words.

The certainty of suffering. You say, "I've had enough suffering. Now it's time for some peace and pleasure." But who knows what's coming? The testimony of those who are mature in the Lord is that trials are often constant. That's what the word "suffer" in this passage means. It means to be "constantly suffering." Listen to the words of Dr. Edward Judson at the dedication of Judson Memorial Church in New York City. Referring to the life of his father, Adoniram Johnson, the great missionary, he said, "Suffering and success go together. If you are succeeding without suffering, it is because others before you have suffered. If you are suffering without succeeding, it is that others after you may succeed."

The source of suffering. Jesus adds, "The devil is about to throw some of you into prison," making it clear that our suffering is not always the result of our sin. Sometimes it's the result of doing what is right. You see, now that Jesus has ascended to His throne in heaven, the only way for the devil to show His hatred for Christ is by attacking those of us who love Him. But the Savior encourages us not to be afraid. Why not? Because of two more facts about suffering.

The purpose of suffering. "The devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested." The word "tested" means to prove the value of something. In other words, Satan may mean it for evil against us, but one day, if you belong to Jesus, you'll be able to look back on what you've suffered and say with the Patriarch Joseph, "God meant it for good. He used it to bring out the best in me and bless others in the process." Or as Job the Great Sufferer put it, "When He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold."

The brevity of suffering. Jesus says, "You will have tribulation ten days." Those who believe the seven churches represent seven ages of church history say this refers to the ten Roman emperors who persecuted the church. That may be true. Others think it is an homage to Daniel and his friends. For when they were tested by King Nebuchadnezzar, how long did the test last?

Ten days after which they were exalted to high positions in the king's court. But whatever the reference, its meaning is clear. Our suffering will not last long. Life is like a mist that is quickly vanishing, and as we suffer the things of this life, 1 Corinthians 10:13 says, "God will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make a way of escape, that you may be able to bear it."

5. Crowns

You wonder, "Is it worth it to suffer for Christ?" Jesus answers that question in verse 10, "Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life." That's interesting, isn't it? Jesus could have said, "Be strong or smart or successful," something that would fit right in with our success-driven culture. But He didn't. He said, "Be faithful." Why? Because that's what we lack—in our marriages, our families, our work, our churches. All it takes is a little opposition and we are ready to quit. Yet faithfulness is what God treasures most. Remember the master's words in the parable of the talents, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you've been faithful over a few things. I will make you ruler over many things."

But you say, "I've tried to be faithful, but I always end up failing." Then try David Livingstone's formula. The great missionary to Africa was standing before a group of students at the University of Glasgow, the signs of suffering evident in his body. Thirty different illnesses had left him emaciated. His left arm, crushed by a lion, hung limp at his side. But he offered the students hope for the trials they too would face. He said to them, "May I tell you what supported me through all the years of exile among people whose language I could not understand and whose attitude toward me was always uncertain and often hostile? It was this: 'Lo, I am with you always, even until the end of the world.' On these words I staked everything and they have never failed me."

If that is not enough motivation, cling to the double promise in verses 10 and 11. The first half is found in verse 10. Jesus says, "Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life." The Bible talks a lot about crowns, promising that just as the ancient Olympic athletes won laurel wreaths to celebrate their victories, you and I can win imperishable crowns to signify our loyalty to Christ forever. One crown is the crown of glory, given to faithful elders. Another crown is the crown of joy, given to faithful soul-winners. A third crown is the crown of righteousness, given to those who look forward to the Lord's return. But this is the crown of life, given to those who are faithful until death.

"Then it's a martyr's crown!" you say. "Something only martyrs can wear." No. Jesus doesn't say to be faithful in death. He says to be faithful until death. James makes the same point in 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." So it isn't only martyrs. It's for anyone who loves the Lord and proves it by being faithful under trial. That's the real test of our faith - not how often we go to church, read the Bible, or pray. The real proof is

how we respond to temptation and how faithful we are under trial. So ask yourself: How much do I love Jesus? Am I as holy in private as I seem to be in public? Am I as cheerful when things go wrong as when they're going well?

Verse 11 gives the second half of the promise—escape from the second death. “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.” What is the second death? According to the Bible, those who reject Christ die two times. The first death is separation of the soul from the body. James 2:26 explains, “The body without the spirit is dead.” But that’s not the end of it. The Bible says those who reject Christ will be resurrected one day to stand before Him in judgment, and because they’ve not given Him the worship in this life that He deserves, they will be separated from Him forever in eternity to come. Revelation 20:14 says, “This is the second death...anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.”

Those are two powerful reasons, then, why it is worth it to be faithful to Christ until death: 1) Because we’ve been forgiven and will live with Him forever in heaven; and 2) Because every act of loyalty in this life will be rewarded in the life to come.

Let the testimony of Polycarp inspire you. It was towards the end of February. His congregation urged him to get out of Smyrna and escape the persecution that was beginning again. But he didn’t want to leave. So they forced him. They hid him in a cave, certain no one would find him. But they did. And to the surprise of his captors, he offered them something to eat and drink when they arrived. When they finished, he asked if he could get them anything else. “No,” they said. So he asked for permission to pray. “What can it hurt?” they thought looking at the old man. Little did they realize that he would go on in prayer for more than two hours. Imagine his words. “Dear Lord, we know that all men are sinners, and that no one can come to God except through your Son, Jesus Christ.” And on and on he went, giving them a full-length presentation of the gospel.

Finally, they took him away, back to the city. The officer in charge kept urging him to recant. “What harm can it do to sacrifice to the emperor?” Polycarp replied, “Jesus is Lord, and I cannot compromise that fact.” On arrival, to impress the crowd, they pushed him out of the carriage and onto the ground. Then they led him into the amphitheater and made him stand before the pro-consul. The pro-consul said, “Have respect to your age, old man. Swear that Caesar is Lord. Swear once and I will let you go and die in peace. Revile the Christ. He cannot be Lord.” Polycarp said with fearless devotion, “Eighty and six years I have served Him and He has never done me wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” The pro-consul persisted, “Swear by the genius of Caesar. I have wild beasts you know, and if you will not change your mind, I will throw you to them.” Polycarp was unmoved. He replied, “**BID THEM BE BROUGHT!**” (I love that!) But that angered the pro-consul all the more, so that he went on, “Since you despise the beasts, unless you change your mind, I will make you to be destroyed by fire.”

Infuriated by the old man's composure and eager to see him suffer, the mob began to gather wood for the pyre. Polycarp stood by the stake and said, "It will not be necessary to fasten me. I have strength from my Lord and Christ." Then he prayed, "Lord, Almighty God, Father of Thy Beloved Son, Jesus, through Whom we have received knowledge of Thee, I thank Thee that Thou has thought me worthy this day and hour to share the cup of Thy Christ among the number of Thy witnesses." Then the fire was kindled. But the wind kept driving the flames away, prolonging his agony. So finally, no longer able to stand it, a soldier drew his sword and put an end to his misery. Misery? He continued to praise Christ till the moment of his death.

That was the pastor of the church in Smyrna. He was faithful until death and is now enjoying the crown of life. Do you love Jesus enough to follow his example? The truth is: Nobody likes to suffer. But suffering is a fact of life. The only unresolved issue is: How will you respond to it? By God's grace, let's respond with faithfulness and love. For Jesus has promised, "Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life."