

The Church in Smyrna

Revelation 2:8-11 (NASB)

⁸ "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this:

⁹ *I know your **tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich)**, and the slander by those who say they are Jews, and are not, but are **a synagogue of Satan**. ¹⁰ **Do not fear** what you are about to suffer. Behold, **the devil** is about to throw some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have **tribulation for ten days**. **Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life**. ¹¹ The one who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who overcomes will not be hurt by **the second death**.'*

Introduction

We continue our series on Jesus' letters to the seven churches in the Book of Revelation. Although they were written to the churches in the first century in Roman Asia (or Asia Minor, modern day western Turkey--look at the map in the bulletin insert), Christ still speaks to us through His message.

A recap. Last Sunday, we learned that it is God's will for the believers to defend the biblical truth in the Church without losing their first love for the Lord and for each other. We also learned that, unless the Church repents, the Lord wouldn't mind closing church doors. I pray that the Lord speak to us again this morning as we study Jesus' letter to the Church in Smyrna. Let me begin with some background information.

Smyrna: It was a thriving city "located just 35 miles north of Ephesus." It was "known for its beauty, wealth, and achievement. The city rivaled Ephesus in grandeur and influence. Ancient coin inscriptions describe Smyrna as 'first of Asia in size and beauty,' and 'The Ornament of Asia.'"

"Not only was this bustling seaport considered a center of prosperity, but the city prided itself as a hub of intellect, art, religion, and athletic prowess. Some of the first schools of science and medicine were founded in Smyrna." It also had a "theater that sat twenty thousand people; Olympian games were held in Smyrna. It was home to the Greek poet Homer and Polycarp, a personal disciple of the Apostle John and the bishop of the church at Smyrna,

known for his faithfulness to Jesus even to martyrdom." I am going to talk more about Polycarp later.

"Smyrna is the Greek word for myrrh—a sap-like substance extracted from tree bark. The substance was used to make fragrant perfumes and anointing oils (Exodus 30:23) and was used in ancient burial preparations (John 19:39)."

*"Throughout history, Smyrna has suffered its fair share of hardship. Seldom has a decade gone by without a significant event ravishing the city. Time and time again, wars, massacres, earthquakes, and plagues have threatened to destroy Smyrna, but the city has always bounced back and rebuilt. With a population of over 3 million, Smyrna continues to thrive today as the modern Turkish city of Izmir. **The local church still thrives there too. In fact, it has been said that more Christians have lived in this region than any other Turkish city in the world.**"¹*

The Letter to the Church in Smyrna: *"First, the letter is the shortest of the seven, at only 90 words. Also, death is mentioned three times in these four verses. And finally, Smyrna was the only congregation besides Philadelphia that did not receive admonishment from Jesus."*²

Content

Let us go over verse by verse.

v. 8: *"And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this:*

Remember? In each letter, Jesus identifies Himself with the circumstances in which the particular church was. For instance, for the Church in Ephesus, He was the One who walks among the churches and opens and closes the church doors. This time, He says to the Church in Smyrna that He is the first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life. He is about to address the issue of persecution, tribulation, death, and resurrection.

v. 9: *'I know your **tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich)**, and **the slander** by those who say they are Jews, and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.*

The congregation in Smyrna was going through three things: tribulation, poverty, and slander.

Poor but You Are Rich. Obviously, the believers in Smyrna were ordinary and poor folks. They were poor in material sense, but in God's eyes, they were rich. We want rather to be rich in God's eyes than in money, right? I will speak more about the contrast between two perspectives later, divine and human, when I talk about the Church in Laodicea (who thought they were rich, but in God's eyes, they were poor). Just remember this morning that God looks differently from us at the worldly wealth. To the Church in Smyrna, Jesus says, don't think that you are poor. You are rich. It is more than meets the eye.

Slandered by a Group of Jews? Now, a group of people who claimed that they were Jews slandered the believers, but Christ says, they are not Jews, but a synagogue of Satan. It is Satan, Christ points out, who instigates a group of people, whatever ethnicity they are, to slander the believers. Here's the truth: any group opposes the Gospel of Jesus and persecutes the believers is a synagogue of Satan. Christ also commands us to see what's really behind every persecution against the believers; there's Satan, the devil. In other words, persecution by nature is the devil's assault on the believers in the form of tribulation, imprisonment, slander, or even death. Outside, we see the persecutors, but, deep inside, we must see the devil who uses them to tempt us to renounce our faith in Christ.

v. 10: **Do not fear** what you are about to suffer. Behold, **the devil** is about to throw some of you into prison, **so that you will be tested**, and you will have **tribulation** for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Jesus clearly acknowledges the seriousness of upcoming persecution against the believers in Smyrna. He even forewarns them that they will suffer more. The devil will throw some of them into prison. They will be tested and tempted to give up and renounce their faith in Jesus. They will go through tribulation for ten days. I am not sure what the ten days here refer to. Scholars believe that it represents ten periods of persecution. Whatever that may be, that 10 days will continue until God's time is up. During that time, some believers will die, whom we call martyrs.

Speaking of martyrs, in Heaven, underneath the altar, John the Apostle saw the souls of the martyrs who had been killed "⁹ ... because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; ¹⁰ and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who live on the earth?" ¹¹ And a white robe was given to each of them; and they were told that they were to rest for a little while longer, until **the number** of their fellow servants and their brothers and sisters who were to be killed even as they had been, **was completed also**" (Revelation 6:9-11).

Here's one of God's mysteries. Until the number of martyrs is completed up to God's plan, persecution will continue on earth. That's perhaps why God allows His children to go through persecution. Persecution is God's plan for us. Christ made it clear early on that those who follow Him will be persecuted. ¹¹ "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in this same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:11-12).

Christ calls it a blessing to those who are persecuted in Jesus. It is an honor and privilege. A great reward in Heaven awaits the persecuted as well. Perhaps, not everyone will be asked to take this burden; in fact, it is our human nature to avoid any type of hardship. However, those who willingly persevere persecution, theirs is heaven, Christ promises.

Get this: if we believe in Jesus and follow Him, we will face persecution. It is a fact. It is a truth. It is God's plan. God allows us to undergo tribulation even to the point of death.

Back to the text. The Lord says to the believers in Smyrna. "You are about to enter the period of persecution. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life."

What does the Lord expect from us during persecution? Do not fear, He says, because I am with you. Next, be faithful until death. Do not give up your faith; instead, stay the course. Do not deny His name. If you overcome, He will give you the crown of life. Paul the Apostle also reminds us that "our momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2 Corinthians 4:17). Dying for Christ is worth it all.

v. 11: *The one who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to **the churches**. The one who overcomes will not be hurt by **the second death**.*

Once again, Christ closes His letter with an invitation to choose wisely. The one who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Please note here that the Spirit of God speaks to the "churches," not just the church in Smyrna. Christ's message is applied to the universal Church. He also promises one more time: Those who overcome will not be hurt by the second death.

What Is the Second Death? It appears four times in the Bible, all in the Book of Revelation (Revelation 2:11, 20:6, 20:14, 21:8). The first death is, of course, our physical death when we stop breathing and our heart stops beating. Without exception, everyone goes through the first death. There's another death called the second death. It comes after our resurrection. In the second death, the believers in Christ will not participate: those who are born again in Christ, and those who lived out God's will in their lives. The second death is the eternal fire. It is hell, the lake of fire forever: "*Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the **second death**, the lake of fire*" (Revelation 20:14).

Who will be hurt by the second death? Those whose names are not written in the Book of Life. God's Word lists: "*But for the cowardly, and unbelieving, and abominable, and murderers, and sexually immoral persons, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the **second death***" (Revelation 21:8). Those who die on account of their faith in Jesus will never taste the second death.

Let me tell you the story of Polycarp the martyr.

Who Was Polycarp?

"Polycarp was a personal disciple of the Apostle John. As an old man, he was the bishop of the Church at Smyrna. Persecution against the Christians broke out there and believers were being fed to the wild beasts in the arena. The crowd began to call for the Christians' leader Polycarp. So the authorities sent out a search party to bring him in. ... So when Polycarp was brought into the arena, the proconsul pled with him: "Curse Christ and I will release you."

REPLY: "Eighty-six years I have served Him. He had never done me wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who has saved me?"

The proconsul reached for an acceptable way out: "Then do this, old man. Just swear by the genius of the emperor and that will be sufficient." (The "genius" was sort of the "spirit" of the emperor. To do this would be a recognition of the pagan gods and religion.)

REPLY: "If you imagine for a moment that I would do that, then I think you pretend that you don't know who I am. Hear it plainly. I am a Christian."

More entreaties. Polycarp stood firm.

The proconsul threatened him with the wild beasts.

REPLY: "Bring them forth. I would change my mind if it meant going from the worse to the better, but not to change from the right to the wrong."

The proconsul's patience was gone: "I will have you burned alive."

REPLY: "You threaten fire that burns for an hour and is over. But the judgment on the ungodly is forever."

The fire was prepared. Polycarp lifted his eyes to heaven and prayed: "Father, I bless you that you have deemed me worthy of this day and hour, that I might take a portion of the martyrs in the cup of Christ. . . Among these may I today be welcome before thy face as a rich and acceptable sacrifice."

As the fire engulfed him, the believers noted that it smelled not so much like flesh burning as a loaf baking. He was finished off with the stab of a dagger. His followers gathered his remains like precious jewels and buried them on February 22, a day they set aside to be remembered. The year was probably 155."³

Conclusion

From its very inception, the Church of God experienced persecution and tribulation. Many believers were slandered, abused, ostracized, tortured, imprisoned, and even lost their lives. Persecution continued for the next two thousand years. It still happens today all over the world. It will happen tomorrow until Christ comes.

The lesson I got from Christ's message to the Church in Smyrna is the proper attitude toward persecution and martyrdom: We don't actively seek the opportunity to become a martyr. However, when persecution arises, we should not avoid it nor fear it, but take it as a man. The Lord doesn't exempt us from persecution. He knows what we go through. He will be with us. He commands us not to be ashamed of His name, but to be a bold witness to His name. To those who remain faithful until death, Christ will give the crown of life. Those who overcome will not suffer the second death.

Let those who have ears, let them hear. Amen.

End Notes

1. https://www.christianity.com/wiki/end-times/what-god-say-church-at-smyrna.html#google_vignette.
2. Ibid.

3. https://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1-300/polycarp-11629601.html#google_vignette.