

Seven Churches of Asia

The Church at Smyrna

Introduction:

- I. One of the most inescapable consequences of life is suffering.
 - A. And yet we will go to almost any length to avoid it.
 1. Unfortunately, everyone experiences suffering in their life to one degree or another.
 2. It's just part of living.
 - B. The Scriptures tell us quite a lot about the subject of suffering – especially how to handle suffering.
 1. James writes of suffering brought on by various trials.
 - a. **James 1:2-3** – *My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.*
 - b. **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.*
 2. Peter speaks of trials brought on by our faithfulness to Jesus Christ.
 - a. **1 Peter 1:6-7** – *In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials,*

7 that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ...

- b. **1 Peter 4:12-16** – *Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; 13 but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. 14 If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified. 15 But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters. 16 Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter.*

3. The apostle Paul also speaks candidly about the benefits of suffering and tribulations.

- a. **Romans 5:1-5** – *Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. 3 And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation*

produces perseverance; 4 and perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5 Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

4. Jesus also taught that blessings come to those who suffer persecution for His name.
 - a. **Matthew 5:10-12** – *"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. 12 Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."*
- II. Persecutions, tribulations and suffering were something Christians of the first century lived with almost every day.
- A. In Revelation chapter 2 we read about one group of Christians who suffered persecution more than most – they lived in the city of Smyrna, a thriving metropolis at the head of a gulf that extended 30-miles inland.
 1. Smyrna was just 40 miles north of Ephesus, but it was a city where Christians DIED for their loyalty to Jesus Christ.
 - B. Today, the cite of the ancient city of Smyrna is the city of Izmir, the third largest city in modern-day Turkey with a population of over 3-million.

1. Izmir is also one of Western Turkey's major seaports, with over 11 million tons of freight shipped through the port every year.
- C. But two thousand years ago, the city of Smyrna boasted of a population of over a quarter million inhabitants.
1. During Roman times it surpassed Ephesus both as a seaport and trading center, and was constantly competing with the city of Pergamos for being the "first city of Asia" or "the glory of Asia."
 2. It's streets were wide and paved, and it had an abundant fresh spring water stored in underground cisterns like these. The city was also widely celebrated for its schools of medicine and science.
 3. Religiously, the city was adorned with temples to all the Greek and Roman gods. And politically, the city of Smyrna was among the most LOYAL cities in all the Roman Empire.
 - a. The citizens of Smyrna had ALWAYS shown their allegiance to Rome – so much so, that Cicero described it as "*the city of our most faithful and ancient allies.*"
 - b. Since the city was so loyal to Rome, Smyrna was chosen by the Roman Senate in 26 A.D. to be the site of a new temple to be erected for the worship of the emperor Tiberius.
 - c. It was the building of this temple, and the worship that went on there that would eventually bring the Christians living in

Smyrna under the most cruel and vicious forms of persecution imaginable.

- D. In the early days of the Roman Empire, emperor worship was nothing more than a spontaneous demonstration of gratitude to Rome – however, toward the end of the first century, in the days of the emperor Domitian, emperor worship was made compulsory.
1. Once every year, citizens of the Roman empire were required to go to a temple where emperor worship was observed, burn a pinch of incense on the alter to Caesar, and say the words “Caesar is Lord.”
 - a. After performing that ritual, the citizen was given a certificate that confirmed his loyalty to Rome and to Caesar.
 2. This act of emperor worship was not intended so much to test a man’s religious devotion to Caesar, as much as it was to test his political loyalty to Rome.
 - a. Once a man made his sacrifice of incense and received his certificate, he could go worship any god or goddess he chose.
 3. But if anyone refused to burn that pinch of incense and publicly say, “Caesar is Lord,” two things happened:
 - a. They were denied a certificate of loyalty, which meant they could not be *employed* by anyone who was loyal to Rome, nor could they buy from or sell anything to anyone who was a loyal citizen of Rome.

- b. They were automatically branded disloyal to Rome, and were frequently hunted down as an outlaw.
- E. All the Christians living in Smyrna had to do was go to the Temple of Tiberius once a year, burn some incense, say “Caesar is Lord,” get their certificate, then go away and worship as they pleased.
- 1. But that is precisely what the Christians in Smyrna could not do.
 - a. They could call no man Lord – that was the name they reserved exclusively to Jesus Christ, their Lord and Savior.
 - 2. As a result of their uncompromising loyalty to Jesus Christ, several things happened to these courageous saints in Smyrna.
 - a. First, without a certificate of loyalty from Rome, they couldn’t find employment, and were therefore forced to live in abject poverty.
 - (1). We can’t even begin to imagine the level of poverty to which these saints willingly subjected themselves to.
 - (2). Try to imagine what it would be like to live with no job, no home, no way of buying or selling anything, and no help of any kind from friends and family, let alone the government which branded you a traitor.
 - c. Second, the Christians of Smyrna lived under the constant threat of informers who would turn them in to gain favor with Rome.

(1). Nowhere in the Roman Empire was life more dangerous for a Christian than in Smyrna. In his book, Letters To The Seven Churches, William Barclay writes, *“For a man to become a Christian anywhere was to become an outlaw. In Smyrna above all places, for a man to enter the church was literally to take his life in his hands. In Smyrna the church was a place for heroes.”*

- F. Although the cities of Ephesus and Smyrna were separated by only 50 miles, they were worlds apart in so far as what the Christians in these two cities faced.
1. The members of the church in EPHESUS were struggling to regain a lost love.
 2. The members of the church in SMYRNA were struggling to stay alive.
- G. Let's turn our attention now to the letter from the Lord which was addressed to the church at Smyrna:
1. **Revelation 2:8-11** – *“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, ‘These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life: 9 “I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 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. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. 11 "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."

Body:

- I. The Lord begins His address to the church at Smyrna by using words and phrases we found in the first chapter of Revelation.
 - A. First, He speaks *"to the angel of the church of Smyrna."*
 1. As we discussed last time, this seems to be a reference to the inner spirit or inner life of the church itself -- the inner spirit or inner life that the Lord holds in His hands to either bless or condemn.
 - B. Second, the Lord reminds them that He is the one who is *"the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life."*
 1. The phrase *"the First and the Last"* appears three times in the book of Revelation:
 - a. **Revelation 1:17** – *And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me, "Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last."*
 - b. The passage in **Revelation 2:8**

- c. **Revelation 22:13** – *"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last."*
2. The phrase also appears three times in Isaiah:
 - a. **Isaiah 41:4** – *Who has performed and done it, calling the generations from the beginning? 'I, the LORD, am the first; and with the last I am He."*
 - b. **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."*
 - c. **Isaiah 48:12** – *"Listen to Me, O Jacob, and Israel, My called: I am He, I am the First, I am also the Last."*
3. In Isaiah, Jehovah used the phrase to assure the Southern kingdom of Judah of His absolute deity, and that He was able to destroy their enemies and redeem His people.
 - b. When Jesus uses the words *"the First and the Last,"* He is telling the saints in Smyrna the same thing – He has the power to destroy the enemies of the saints in Smyrna, and power to redeem His people.
2. The phrase that Jesus *"was dead, and came to life"* speaks of His own victory over death, and is meant to assure these saints that He will also give them the same victory over death – especially since many of them are about to forfeit their lives.

II. As the letter continues, the Lord takes an inventory of the church at Smyrna, and tells them what He finds. He began His remarks with those familiar words, “*I KNOW!*” (Rev. 2:9) In the verses that follow, the Lord reveals three things that He knew about the church at Smyrna.

A. First, the Lord was aware of their persecution and tribulation.

1 The word “*tribulation*” comes from the Greek word “*thlipsis*” which means “pressure,” and in classical Greek was always used to speak of pressure in the literal sense.

- a. It was used when speaking of a person being tortured to confess some crime by being slowly crushed to death under the weight of heavy boulders laid upon his chest.
- b. It was also used to describe large stones used by the Romans to grind wheat, or to press the juice out of grapes.
- c. The word “tribulation” used in Revelation 2:9 meant “oppression, affliction, and distress” of every imaginable kind.

2. These courageous saints were subjected to trials, persecutions and tribulations of every kind because of their loyalty to Christ, and for their bearing witness to His name.

- a. We would think a church like this would do precious little in the way of proclaiming the name of Christ. But not these people.

- (1). This is the word used to describe the poverty of the Christians in Smyrna -- they were totally destitute and poverty-stricken.
2. Even though Smyrna was one of the wealthiest cities in all Asia, the Christians who lived there were poor to the point of destitution.
 - a. They could have avoided this economic hardship by compromising their convictions and offering tribute to Caesar, but they didn't. As a result, they suffered terrible financial loss.
 - (1). Because they were branded as disloyal to Rome, they lived under the constant reality of having their earthly goods confiscated, and their homes plundered.
 - b. Similar treatment was experienced by other Christians during the first century, especially among the early Jewish Christians.
 - (1). **Hebrews 10:32-34** – *But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings: 33 partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations, and partly while you became companions of those who were so treated; 34 for you had compassion on me in my chains, and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven.*

c. They all knew first-hand what it cost to be a Christian – just as the Lord had told His disciples when He said **(Matthew 16:24-26)** – *“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?”*

3. How well do we truly understand and appreciate these words?
 - a. Have you ever asked yourself what you would be willing to give up to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?
 - (1). Would you give up your right to earn an income to be a disciple of Christ?
 - (2). Would you give up your home or other property you own, and give up your car, your bank accounts, and all your earthly possessions to be a disciple of Christ?
 - b. The saints at Smyrna did. They understood that Christ had every right to demand they give up everything for Him, because He had given up everything for them.
 - c. In 2nd Corinthians, the apostle Paul speaks of what Christ gave up so that we might enjoy the riches of heaven:

(1). **2 Corinthians 8:9** – *“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich!”*

4. But what the saints in Smyrna lost of this world’s possessions, they gained of the rewards of heaven – and in that sense, the Lord tells them *“you are rich.”*
 - b. They knew their momentary poverty couldn’t even begin to compare to the eternal riches that awaited them. They may have been poor materially, but they were **rich** spiritually.
- C. Not only was the Lord aware of their persecution and tribulation, and aware of their poverty, the Lord also knew these faithful Christians faced *“the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.”*
 1. Throughout the Roman empire, wealthy Jewish businessmen often formed close alliances with Roman officials. This was especially true in cities where trade and commerce brought prosperity to those in the business community -- cities like Smyrna.
 2. These Jews would be quick to join in the persecution of Christians for two reasons:

- a. Since these Jews blasphemed Jesus Christ as “the hanged one,” they would naturally be opposed to anyone who claimed to be a follower of Christ.
 - b. Since the Christians in Smyrna were already considered disloyal to Rome by local officials, many Jews soon discovered they could gain favor with Rome by bringing false, trumped-up charges against these Christians.
3. Therefore, the Lord summarizes the moral character of the Jews in Smyrna by saying these Jews are not Jews, and by calling them a “synagogue of Satan.”
- a. To say that these Jews are not Jews is similar to the statement the apostle Paul made, **(Romans 2:28-29)** – *“For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart...”*
 - b. And to say these Jews were nothing more than a synagogue of Satan meant they were doing Satan’s work of persecuting the church.
- D. Unfortunately, the worst was yet to come for these faithful Christians.
1. **Revelation 2:10** – *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. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

III. The Lord begins by telling them “*Do not fear.*”

A. Why would the Lord say this? The reason is simply that Satan was not finished testing the loyalty of these saints.

1. They had already been tried by tribulations and poverty, and now Satan was going to bring even more severe trials on some of them in the form of imprisonment and certain death.

2. The Lord also warns that their tribulation was going to intensify – “*you will have tribulation ten days.*”

a. This isn’t speaking of a literal period of time, nor is it a reference to the ten periods of Roman persecution against the church.

b. Rather, the number “ten” is being used in a prophetic manner.

(1). The number ten is always used to suggest strength and power.

(2). If that is how the Lord uses the number ten here, then He is warning that the persecutions of the past won’t even compare to the persecutions of the future -- they will be full strength and powerful.

- B. Even though these saints faced certain imprisonment and death, and even though their persecutions were about to intensify, the Lord added: *“Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”*
1. This meant that they were to remain faithful to the Lord, even to the point of death.
 - a. This is not saying “be faithful **until** you die” (although that is certainly expected), but rather this is saying “be faithful **EVEN IN THE EVENT OF** death,” or “**THROUGH** death” – accept death rather than deny your faith.
 2. For those who are willing to give up their lives rather than deny their faith, the Lord promises the “crown of life.”
- C. It’s hard to imagine anyone being asked to die rather than deny their loyalty to the Lord – especially in our day and time.
1. But Christians of the first and second centuries faced the possibilities of being asked to do that very thing almost every day of their lives -- and many of them did choose death.
 - a. This is how they won the victory over Satan! (**Revelation 12:10-11**) – *“Then I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, ‘Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down. And they overcame him by the blood of*

the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death."

2. Is our love for Christ this great?

IV. Finally, the Lord closes this short letter the way He closes all these letters – with a warning to listen carefully to what He is saying.

A. **Revelation 2:11** – *"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."*

1. What is the "second death" mentioned here?

a. John defines the "second death" as the "lake of fire:"

(1). **Revelation 20:14** – *Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.*

b. John also says this "second death" is the final destiny of the wicked:

(1). **Revelation 21:8** – *But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.*

c. The Lord told the saints in Smyrna that only those who "OVERCOME" will "not be hurt by the second death."

- B. Essentially, the Lord says there are only two choices:
1. Either we will be one who OVERCOMES by remaining loyal to the Lord, even if it requires our life, and thereby receive the crown of life...
 2. Or, we FAIL to overcome, and we compromise our convictions to spare ourselves persecution and tribulation, we will be among those who are HURT BY THE SECOND DEATH.

Conclusion:

- I. Did you notice something unusual about this letter – something that’s missing? The Lord finds nothing in the lives of these Christians to condemn or criticize.
 - B. That doesn’t mean they were perfect or sinless -- there has never been a perfect Christian, and since congregations are made up of Christians, there has never been a perfect church.
 1. What it does mean is that, as the whole, these Christians were faithfully striving to the very best of their abilities to maintain their love and loyalty to Jesus Christ, even if it meant sacrificing their safety, their comfort and their own lives in the process.
- II. If you had your choice, which church would you want to be a member of:
 - A. The church at Ephesus:

1. A hard working church know for persevering under difficult time, and for standing firm against false teachers.
 2. The only problem was they had left their first love and were in danger of having their lampstand removed from its place unless they repented?
- B. The church at Smyrna:
1. A faithful, hard working congregation of people living under constant persecution and unimaginable economic hardship brought on by their refusal to compromise their convictions.
 2. And the worst was yet to come – many of these saints would soon face imprisonment and certain death.
 - a. The only way they could spare their lives would be to deny the Lord.
- C. Nearly 60 years after this letter was written to the church at Smyrna, the persecution of the saints there reached a peak.
1. An old saint by the name of Polycarp, who, according to tradition, had been a student and close companion of the apostle John, and who was now one of the elders of the church in Smyrna, was eventually arrested and brought before the authorities and told to swear allegiance to Caesar and blaspheme Christ.

- a. Here's what this courageous saint said in reply: *“Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never once wronged me; how then can I blaspheme my King, Who has saved me?”*
 - b. Even threatened with death by wild beasts, Polycarp remained strong in his stand.
 - c. Finally, he was warned that if he didn't change his mind, he would be killed by fire. Polycarp replied, *“You threaten me with fire, which burns for an hour, and is soon extinguished; but the fire of the future judgment and of eternal punishment reserved for the ungodly, you are ignorant of. Why do you delay? Do whatever you please.”*
 - d. With this final declaration still ringing in their ears, the Gentiles and Jews of Smyrna together gathered wood on the Jewish Sabbath Day and used it to burn Polycarp alive.
2. Can we say that we are willing to maintain our love and loyalty to Jesus Christ even if it means sacrificing our safety, our comfort and even our own lives?
- a. Are we willing to face persecution and tribulation to proclaim the gospel of Christ to the people in this community?
 - b. Are we willing to give up any and all of our material possessions if they stand between us and our Lord?

- c. Are we willing to remain faithful to the Lord even to the point of death?
3. Unless we are, we cannot expect to overcome – nor can we expect to stand in the Day of Judgment beside Polycarp or others like him from Smyrna and hear the Lord say to both of us, “*Well done, good and faithful servant... enter into the joy of your Lord.*”

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