

THE CHURCH THAT SUFFERED

Revelation 2:8-11

Smyrna was one of the fairest and noblest cities in Asia Minor. It was located at the mouth of a great river, on a deep and beautiful bay which formed an excellent harbor. The land nearby was very fertile, and produced grapes in abundance.

Smyrna was some forty miles north of Ephesus, and was in some respects its rival. It was an ancient, large, beautiful, populous, wealthy and famous city. It became the most beautiful city of Asia and the most loyal colleague of Rome. It contests, and not without good reason, with six other cities the honor of being the birthplace of Homer. Its excellent location made it possible for it to become the trade center of the Levant, both in ancient and in modern times. Its name has been changed to "Ismir", but it is still an important commercial city, with a population before the World War of more than 300,000, of whom 200,000 were nominally Christian. The church, which was established there, like the one in Philadelphia, is one whose light has never been extinguished.

1. The Command.

"And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write." Polycarp, who was converted under the preaching of John, served as pastor of this church, and, in all probability, he is the one to whom our Lord addressed this letter.

2. The Church.

"The church in Smyrna." Smyrna is not mentioned elsewhere in the scriptures, so we have no means of ascertaining when, and by whom, the Christian faith was first planted there. We may, however, conjecture that that great commercial city did not escape attention either by Paul or his associates in missionary effort during his ministry of three years in Ephesus.

Some private citizens, after receiving the light of the gospel elsewhere, may have formed the nucleus of the church, which became eminent for its purity and influence. Regardless of whom the founders of this church were, it retained its original splendor for centuries, and at the present time a larger percentage of the people in that city are professed Christians than in any other city in the whole empire.

3. The Christ.

"These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive." (Who became dead, and lived). Christ saw His churches as they were and told them what was wrong and what they needed. He sees all other churches like those churches, then and now, and speaks to them through these messages. Christ still watches His churches on earth. He looked down from heaven on the church in Smyrna and saw its condition and gave it His message.

(1) "The First."

This expression emphasizes His deity. To the church in Smyrna Christ presented Himself in preincarnate character, as pre-existent God who lived before He was born in Bethlehem, who lived in the eternity of the past before creation's day. He is before all in time, and above all in supremacy.

(2) "The Last."

This expression emphasizes His eternity. To the church in Smyrna Christ presented Himself as the One who was and is and always will be, without beginning and without ending, the Eternal God. Look back into eternity past, and He is there; peer into eternity to come, and He will be present. As "The Last" He is after all and closing all.

(3) "Dead."

The expression "was dead" literally means "became dead." There is a vast difference between these two. "I was dead" describes "a past condition." "I became dead" describes "a past act." Christ's death was not a past condition, but a past act that links His deity with His humanity and reveals Him as "an example of persecution" to Christians who are subjected to persecution.

(4) "Alive."

The expression "is alive" literally means "became alive." He became dead, but He also came to life and lives.

4. The Commendation.

(1) For willingness to work.

"I know thy works." As usual our Lord first commends the church for its good works. His eye is on His servants all the while and everywhere. He knows all, both in the corporate life of the church, and in the individual life of the Christian. Christians do not do any work for Him without being observed by Him and appreciated by Him. While we believe in salvation by grace, we certainly believe that a man should prove his salvation by his works.

(2) For steadfastness in suffering.

"And tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan." Thus, their sufferings are listed under three heads: --

a. Tribulation.

This strong word is not used very frequently. It is a term which represents trials of all kinds. It signifies a pressure of persecution. The whole wording of the message is aglow with tribulation, persecution, suffering and death.

"Smyrna" signifies "myrrh" -- a fragrant spice used for embalming the dead, derived it is said by "bleeding" the plant. "Tribulation" is a word that throbs with meaning. It suggests the pressure of the stones that ground the wheat, or that forces the blood out of the grapes.

The pagans abhorred the Christians because they considered them to be the enemies of their gods, and the cause of all public calamities. The Jews were hostile toward them because they believed in Christ. The Christians were being subjected to the most fearful tortures, and were being put to death on account of their loyalty to Christ, and as He looked at the members of the church, He said in tones of infinite tenderness, "I know thy tribulation."

It is usually assumed that Christians were persecuted because the truth for which they bore witness affronted the pride, the prejudices, and the passions of men. While this is quite true, it is not all of the truth. These great afflictions through which they were called to pass were the immediate work of Satan, and no mere result of the offended passions, prejudices or interests of men. Satan is the invisible, but the real author of them all. He is the one who instigated the rabble of Judaizers to form a clique and to persecute the Christians.

If the Christians had only been willing to deny their faith in Christ, tribulation would have ceased. But because they steadfastly refused to do this, they suffered tribulation and had their belongings confiscated, being thereby reduced to poverty.

b. Poverty.

Poverty here indicates actual beggary. But, it has no reference to the spirit. The poverty of many of the Christians was traceable directly to the fact of their being Christians. When even a prosperous person would become a Christian, he would soon be so disliked, hated, shunned, and ostracized that he would fall into poverty. To become a Christian meant that one would lose his friends, his social position, his trade, and practically all the bare necessities of life. So, in a wealthy city like Smyrna, where buying, selling, and getting gain was the all-absorbing occupation, and where financial success was all but worshipped, poverty was not merely odious, but even infamous.

However, things are not always what they seem. An illuminating parenthesis says that the Christians in Smyrna, though apparently poor, were actually rich. They were poor in the sight of the world, but rich in God's sight. They were financially poor, but spiritually rich. Secular wealth is of contingent value; spiritual wealth is of absolute worth. Secular wealth is often a bane, but spiritual wealth is always a blessing. They were rich because they had Christ. They were rich in the favor and love of God, rich in faith, rich in grace, rich in Christian experience, rich in fellowship, rich in answered prayers, rich in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, rich in service, rich in good works, rich in the hope of the gospel, and rich in the blessed prospect of the crown of life. They were impoverished materially, but enriched spiritually. They possessed the true riches that moth could not corrupt and thieves could not steal. They had the hope of a home beyond the grave, where every source of suffering and sorrow shall be dried up and every spring of joy opened. Their treasures were not conditioned by circumstances, nor could they be taken away from them.

Concerning soul wealth, such as these Christians had, it may be said that enemies cannot prevent one from getting it, in its very nature it is a blessing, it cannot be taken away from one for the possessor even takes them through the gates of death, and it makes its possessor very influential. It gave the Smyranean Christians a grander influence than money could give. It gave them influence over souls. It drew men to them and to Christ. Their church had material poverty and spiritual power. Today, our churches have material wealth and spiritual weakness.

c. Calumny.

They were slandered and reviled by their enemies. Some people in Smyrna professed Judaism, asserted they were the people of God, and villified all who refused to think as they did. The patrons of the synagogue of Satan hated the Christians and published libelous statements concerning their character, their purpose, and their mode of life. What form these slanderous statements took, or on what they were based, we do not know for certain, but with the records of the New Testament and of church history in our hands, we may reasonably infer that they had to do with: --

(a) Their relationship to the government.

They naturally would accuse them of sedition and disloyalty, for which their persistent refusal to offer sacrifice to the emperor would afford plausible pretext.

(b) Their relationship to society.

Many of the popular games and festivals, as well as other social gatherings, involved sacrifices to idols, and from these the Christians stood aloof. Therefore, they were denounced as haters of the human race.

(c) Their relationship to God.

They asserted, as Christ had forewarned His disciples that they would, that the Christians were servants of Beelzebub.

(d) Their relationship to morality.

It was charged against the Christians that their assemblies, which they obliged to hold at night, were for the vilest of purposes. There wasn't a vice or a crime that was considered too bad to charge that they had committed.

5. The Counsel. Revelation 2:10-11

(1) A Prohibition of Fear.

"Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer." Resist them, but do not fear them. Christ did not want them to stand with souls unnerved in the presence of their enemies. He did not merely say, "Fear not," but He showed them abundant reasons why they should not fear. Fear is the characteristic of a coward. Fear takes all the strength out of a person. It paralyzes effort, dampens exertion, and is the sure precursor of defeat.

(2) A Prediction of Adversities.

"Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you in prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days." The conflict was to wax worse. Reproach was to be followed by suffering, imprisonment and tribulation. He told them that heavier trials awaited them. He informed them that He knew what was lying in the womb of the future; that persecution was going to increase, that fearsome darkness would deepen, that tribulation would be more severe, and that the pressure would get much heavier.

The instigator of these things was Satan. Human agents were employed to seize some of the Christians and cast them into prison, but it was all done at the instigation of Satan. He worketh in the children of disobedience, inspiring them and raising their antagonism to the cause of purity, freedom and happiness. Christ said, "The devil shall cast some of you into prison." In some respects, incarceration is worse than martyrdom. It is better to die than to live without light, freedom, or fellowship. "Ye shall have tribulation ten days." The tribulation would be severe, but it would be limited by the Lord. He will not permit one to be tried beyond his capacity.

(3) A Plea for Faithfulness.

"Be thou faithful unto death." Fidelity is a virtue of universally acknowledged importance and worth. A faithful person can be trusted; he is ever the same whether behind you or facing you. Faithfulness means allegiance, trust, persistence in the path of duty, uncompromising steadfastness and obedience.

a. Faithfulness to Christ.

This is due to Him and possible for all.

b. Faithfulness to Duty.

Next to the Lord's work, the most sacred duty is that of obedience to God's Word and conformity to God's will, everywhere and at all times. We should be faithful to duty, whatever it may be shown to be, not only in the Word of God but also in the providence of God. He shows us duty in His providence by giving us opportunity and strength for its discharge, just as He points out duty in His Word by laying down prescriptions and rules for us to observe. God expects Christians to be faithful to their duties through all temptations, opposition and sufferings.

c. Faithfulness unto Death.

"Unto death" does not mean "to the end of your life," but rather "to the worst which the enemy can inflict upon thee, even to death itself." Be

faithful enough to die for Me if necessary. "Keep on proving faithful unto death" as the martyrs have done. At the close of the first century all of the apostles except John had died as martyrs. Then followed two centuries during which the Roman Empire sought to abolish Christianity with violence. Many outstanding instances of suffering, martyrdom and victory occurred.

At times Christians were killed unto the weapons were dulled. So many were destroyed by ferocious lions that at times these animals, filled with human blood and flesh, refused to continue attack. Christians, before packed amphitheatres and surrounded by roaring lions, went to death with triumphant praying, singing, and testimony. Others were known to arise in balconies, declare their faith in Christ, and ask for the privilege of dying for Him. Their requests were granted at times by their being tossed over the balconies into the arena.

Polycarp, the aged pastor of this church at Smyrna, was a good example of one who was faithful unto death and died as a martyr. In the year 167 a cruel persecution broke out against the Christians. Polycarp would have awaited at his post the fate which threatened him, but his people compelled him to shelter himself in a quiet retreat, where he might, it was thought, safely hide. For a while he remained undiscovered, and spent his time in prayer and intercession for the persecuted Christians. At last his enemies seized one of his children, and, by torture, compelled him to make known where he was hiding. Satisfied now that his hour had arrived, Polycarp refused further flight, saying, "The will of God be done."

He came from the upper story of the house to meet his captors, ordered them as much refreshment as they might desire, and only asked of them this favor, that they would grant him yet one hour of undisturbed prayer. The fulness of his heart carried him on for two hours, and even the heathen were touched by the sight of the old man's devotion. He was then conveyed back to the city of Smyrna and was tried on the charge of being a Christian. The officer before whom he was brought tried to persuade him to yield to the small demand made upon him. "What harm," he asked, "can it do you to offer sacrifice to the emperor?" This was the test which was commonly applied to those accused of being Christians. But not for one moment would the venerable Polycarp consent. Rougher measures were then tried, and he was flung from the carriage in which he was being conveyed. When he appeared in the amphitheatre, the one in charge said to him that if he would curse Christ that he would set him free. But the old minister answered, "Eighty and six years have I served Christ, and He has never done me wrong; how, then, can I deny Him, my King and my Saviour?" In vain was he threatened with being thrown to the wild beasts or burned alive; and at last the fatal proclamation was made that, "Polycarp confessed himself a Christian." This was the death warrant. He was condemned to be burned alive. Jews and Gentiles alike hastened in rage and fury to collect wood from the baths and workshops for the funeral pile. The old man laid aside his garments, and took his place in the midst of the fuel. When they would have nailed him to the stake, he said to them, "Leave me thus, I pray, unfastened; He who has enabled me to brave the fire will give me strength also to endure its fierceness." He then uttered this brief prayer: "O Lord, Almighty God, the Father of Thy beloved Son Jesus Christ, through whom we have received a knowledge of Thee, God of the angels and of the whole creation, of the whole race of man, and of the saints who live before thy presence; I thank Thee that Thou hast thought me worthy, this day and this hour, to share the cup of thy Christ among the number of Thy witnesses!" The fire was kindled, but a high wind drove the flame to one side, and prolonged his sufferings; and at last the executioner slew him with a sword.

Thus did one of Christ's saints at Smyrna die, "faithful unto death," and winner of "the crown of life," and never to "be hurt of the second death."

"When my life is past,
How glad I shall be
That the lamp of my life
Has been blazed out for Thee.
I shall not mind whatever I gave
Of labor or money one sinner to save;
I shall not mind that the way has been rough,
That Thy dear feet led the way was enough.
When I am dying,
How glad I shall be
That the lamp of my life
Has been blazed out for Thee."