

THE CHURCH THAT SUFFERED

Revelation 2:8-11

Smyrna was one of the fairest and noblest cities in Asia Minor. This large, populous, wealthy and famous city was located at the mouth of the Hermus River on a deep and beautiful bay or gulf some thirty-five or forty miles north of Ephesus. The fertile land in the valley nearby produced grapes in abundance, so Smyrna had a splendid trade in wines. The excellent location of the city made it possible for her to become an important commercial center. Her proud citizens claimed that Smyrna was the birthplace of Homer, and that their city was first in beauty and in the worship of Caesar.

We do not have any means of ascertaining when and by whom the gospel of Christ was first proclaimed there. We may conjecture that this great commercial city did not escape the attention of Paul or his associates during his ministry of three years in Ephesus. It is even possible that some private citizens became Christians elsewhere and then became the nucleus of the church there, which became eminent in purity and influence. Regardless of whom its founders were, the church retained its original splendor for centuries, and to this date a larger percentage of the people in Smyrna, which is now "Ismir," are professing Christians than in any other city in the whole empire.

I. The Christ. Revelation 2:8.

Our Lord is depicted here in a twofold manner:

1. As One Who is "the first and the last."

Only Deity could speak such words. To the church in Smyrna Christ presented Himself as having been in a pre-existent state before He was born in Bethlehem. Look back into eternity past and see Him there. Peer into eternity to come and He will be there. As the One Who was and is and always will be, the One without beginning and without ending, the Son of God is the Eternal One. The expression, "the last," emphasizes His eternity. From everlasting to everlasting He is God. In the midst of change He changes not. He is "the same yesterday, and today, and for ever" (Hebrews 13:8).

2. As One Who "was dead, and is alive."

Many of the church members at Smyrna were being martyred. Our Lord sought to encourage those Christians who had the threat of death constantly hanging over them, and were about to lose their lives for His sake, by reminding them that He too had been put to death, but that He had been raised from the grave. His death was a past act that linked His deity with His humanity and revealed Him as a splendid example for all who might suffer persecution. It must have been a constant inspiration for them to remember that always One was with them Who had conquered death.

Christ died and then came to life. Others live and die, but Christ died and lives. For about thirty-six hours He was held in the grip of death, and then He burst death's prison bars and emerged triumphant. The domain of death is under His sway and He is now "the living one." He Who became dead also became alive and now lives. This fact was a great encouragement to those who were about to die for Him. It is also encouraging for us to know that Christ existed before Satan did and that He will still be here when the Devil is defeated.

II. The Commendation. Revelation 2:9.

Christ saw all that was going on in the church in Smyrna. Nothing escaped His eyes whether it was in the corporate life of the church or in the individual lives of the

Christians. What a comfort it is to know that Christ knows everything about us also! It is truly wonderful to have someone with whom we can share our troubles. It is so helpful when we can unburden ourselves to somebody who understands and cares. Christ is the greatest and best confidant in all the world. No other can bring us the peace and satisfaction which He can. Regardless of how great our suffering or how deep our sorrow, Christ knows and cares.

1. For willingness to work.

As usual our Lord first commended the church for its good works. He said, "I know thy works." The members of that early church were doing their duty by working for Christ and He commended them for their faithfulness to the task. Christians cannot work for Him without having their works observed and appreciated by Him.

2. For steadfastness in suffering.

Their sufferings were listed under three heads:

(1) Tribulation.

The Christians in Smyrna were having a rough time. The enemies of the Christian faith were so aggressive and cruel that it was dangerous to be a Christian there. There was no way of knowing what might happen to the children of God.

"Tribulation", as used here, does not mean the common trials to which all flesh is heir. Some mistaken people think they are bearing their crosses every time they have physical pains. The tribulation about which Christ is speaking here refers to the trouble they would have escaped had they not been Christians. Tribulation was the result of their identification with Christ. What do we know about that sort of thing today?

We seldom use the word tribulation, and yet it throbs with meaning. Thlipsis is the Greek for tribulation, and it means pressure. For instance, it is used of a man who was tortured by being slowly crushed to death by the weight of a great boulder which was laid upon him. It also suggests the pressure of the stones that ground the wheat or that forced the substance out of the grapes. In life there is pressure always. In his autobiography H. G. Wells wrote: "Most individual creatures, since life began, have been up against it They have had to respond to the unrelenting antagonism of their circumstances." Today many are under the pressure of circumstances, opposition, worry and work. Under this pressure many collapse. They simply cannot stand the mental or the physical strain. Nowadays we frequently use the word "tribulation" in the sense of "taking a beating." Have you ever "taken a beating" because you are a Christian? School children in Colombia receive a beating at the hands of a nun each Monday morning if they attend an evangelical Sunday School instead of Mass on Sunday.

G. K. Chesterton once said that it was evident that one was a real man if he could pass the breaking point and not break. It is under such circumstances that Christ is so helpful, enabling us to cope with the pressures of life and remain on our feet.

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 on account of their faith in Christ. Members of that church were being subjected to the most fearful tortures, and some of them were being put to death because of their loyalty to Christ. In tones of

infinite tenderness Christ said to them, "I know thy tribulation." If the Christians had been willing to deny their faith in Christ, their tribulation would have ceased, but this they refused to do.

(2) Poverty.

There are two Greek words which are translated "poverty." Penia describes the poverty of the man who has to work for his living. Ptocheia describes the poverty of the man who is completely destitute or has nothing at all. The poverty of many was traceable directly to the fact that they were Christians. When even a prosperous person became a Christian he was automatically disliked, hated, shunned and ostracized. He would lose most of his friends, his social position, his job and frequently his property was deliberately confiscated. In a wealthy city like that, where financial success was all but worshipped, poverty was not merely odious, but even infamous. So far as worldly goods were concerned, the Christians at Smyrna were destitute, but they had God.

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 weaknesses. No man is any richer than his soul. In these days of give-away shows and quick prosperity people are not interested in what it costs to be a Christian, but in what they can get out of being one. What are you giving up for Christ?

(3) Slander.

With calculated and poisonous venom some Jews in Smyrna whispered their slanders of the Christians into the ears of the Roman authorities. Certain patrons of the synagogue of Satan hated the Christians and published libelous statements concerning their character, their purpose and their mode of life. They did not hesitate to accuse them of any vice or crime, regardless of how terrible it might be. To fight with the tongue is always contemptible. Every slanderer or malicious gossip will have much for which he will have to answer. Our Lord once said, "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake" (Matthew 5:11). However, one who is subjected to this reviling is blessed only when it is false or for Christ's sake.

III. 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 merely say, "Fear not," but He showed them abundant reasons why they should not fear their enemies. 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 into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days." The conflict was to wax worse. He told them that heavier trials awaited them, including imprisonment and suffering.

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. The tribulation would be severe, but limited in length by the Lord. He never permits His own to be tried beyond their capacities.

3. A plea for faithfulness.

"Be thou faithful unto death."

(1) Be faithful to Christ.

(2) Be faithful to duty.

(3) Be faithful unto death.

"Faithful unto death" does not mean merely "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.

At times Christians were killed until the destroying weapons were dulled. At other times so many were destroyed by ferocious lions that these animals, filled with human blood and flesh, refused to continue their attacks. Before packed amphitheatres Christians went to their deaths with triumphant prayers, songs and testimonies. Others arose in balconies and asked for the privilege of dying for the Christ Who had saved them. Their requests were granted 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 his father was hiding. Satisfied now that his hour had arrived, Polycarp refused further flight, saying, "The will of God be done."

While Polycarp was being tried on the charge of being a Christian, the officer in command tried to get him to recant and offer sacrifice to the emperor. After various rough measures were used to get him to do so, 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."