

## The Crowned Church: Smyrna

*Revelation 2:8-11* 8 "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."

As you came to church today, as you drove here, when you arrived, and when you came in, did any of the following cross your mind:

- A fear that the police or government agents might see you going to church?
- A fear that someone you work for or do business with might see you and you might lose income?
- A fear that members of a radical group would attack you either on your way or while in church?
- A fear that for going to church you may be either imprisoned, injured, or killed?

Probably not, but the persecution of Christians is not something that belongs in the past. Open Doors is a group that supports persecuted Christians, and just this last week it said it had 2,123 "martyr" killings, compared with 1,201 in 2012. The head of Open Doors,, Frans Veerman said that this is a very conservative figure based only on what had actually made it into the media, and what could be confirmed. Other groups have estimated the number may be as high as 8000. As a practicing religion, Christianity still faces restrictions and hostility in 111 countries. That might seem far away from you, but it touches your life nonetheless. First, because what is done to true believers, wherever they are, is done to you, and to your Lord. Second, because no true church of God is ever completely exempt from every form of suffering and persecution.

Of the seven churches that Jesus wrote these short letters to, one of them was severely persecuted. One of them went through terrible suffering. And since each of these letters is like a snapshot of every church of every age, of conditions in churches, of situations that face churches, clearly the Lord wanted the letter to the church at Smyrna to continue to teach all churches of all periods.

As I said last week, the letters follow a similar pattern each time. Each church is given a commendation(some), a condemnation, counsel, caution, and challenge. And in each case, the Lord identifies Himself using a particular title, taken from the revelation of Himself in chapter 1.

If Ephesus was the cooling church, then we could call Smyrna the Crowned Church. This church is a picture of every church, and indeed every Christian that comes under persecution for being a Christian, and what we should do, where we should look when it happens.

If you had been a member of the church at Smyrna, let me try to describe what life was like for you. You would have lived in a city about 60 kilometres north of Ephesus. It was also a coastal city, a city in a bay, with a long arm stretching out for miles. The actual city was a harbour city, and being such a safe and protected harbour, it was a very important city for trade. An extremely wealthy, busy city.

You would have lived in a city of rare beauty, which was given these nicknames "the Ornament of Asia," "the Crown of Asia," or sometimes "the Flower of Asia.". It was a very proud city, and became

well-known for its architecture, its medicine and its science. It was famous for being the birthplace of Homer.

Religiously, it hosted many temples to various gods. But it was the first city to build a temple to the goddess Roma, and to the spirit of Rome. She was so fiercely patriotic to Rome, that they were given their freedom to self-govern. Along with this patriotism, came emperor worship.

So while it sounds like a wealthy, beautiful place of many opportunities, it had become a terrible, painful place for this church.

## **I. Christ's Commendation**

*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.*

The Lord Jesus, as a kind Lord, tells this church that He knows and sees all the good they have done, all that they have endured. Specifically, He mentions three things about them:

*First, He knows their pain.* The word translated *tribulations* refers to pressure, affliction, trouble, distress. They have endured problems, difficulties, hard times for the sake of Christ.

In this city, so devoted to emperor worship, each year every citizen had to burn incense on Caesar's altar. If the citizen did so, he was issued a certificate. This certificate became like a life-line. It was a proof of loyal citizenship, proof of belonging to Smyrna and of identifying with it. If you were found without it, you could get the death penalty. Any obedient Christian, whose motto was not Caesar is Lord, but Jesus is Lord, would not burn incense on the altar, and would have certainly invited trouble, problems, difficulties, and worse.

Jesus saw every arrest, every beating, every threat, every act of intimidation and bullying.

There are two ways these trials come to faithful Christians:

First, directly, for naming Christ. In a secular land like ours, the persecution might not right now look like imprisonment, but it could mean facing the wrath of your unbelieving family, colleagues and neighbours once you name Christ. It could mean slowing your promotion at work, or losing customers. It could mean a frivolous lawsuit because you say something about another religion, or about homosexuality. This comes when you directly name Christ

Secondly, these trials come when we indirectly name Christ, simply belonging to Him. You don't have to court opposition. Paul says in:

*2 Tim 3:12 Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.*

*Acts 14:22 we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.*

The Christian life is to be a life of joy, and a life of overcoming. But we do not do so by pretending trials will not come, or thinking that our happiness is some incantation that keeps persecution out of your life. If you are a Christian then you are crucified with Christ. And if we are to be glorified together, then we also suffer together, in some form, at some point.

You know what a biblical response to suffering and persecution is? The letter to Smyrna. And the Lord Jesus says, “I know. I see. I see it all. It is happening under my compassionate gaze. It is happening under my faithful ministry as High Priest.”

Back in 1865, at the height of the American Civil war, some of the slaves sang these words, which some have trivialised and mocked, but they carry simple, beautiful truth: “Nobody knows the trouble I see, nobody knows but Jesus. Nobody knows the trouble I see, glory hallelujah.”

He knows. Jesus also knows something else:

Second, He knows their *poverty*. This is more than ordinary poverty. The word is an unusual word, that refers to the life of a beggar, extreme destitution. Why was this church struggling financially in such a wealthy city? Well, it goes back to the certificate you would get for emperor worship. If you refused to worship, you would be excluded from the trade guilds, from the tax breaks, from the general open doors that came from going with the pagans. Once the Christians devoted themselves to Christ, then by no choice of their own, they were excluded from the economy. Some of them had probably been very wealthy before their conversion, in such a rich city. But unlike the Christians in the city of Laodicea to the north of them, the system they were under impoverished them.

Jesus says, I know this. His commendation is not that they are poor but for the kind of wealth that compensates for their poverty. He says, you really are rich. How are they rich? You can be rich even though you're poor in several ways.

*Luke 12:21 So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.*

*2 Corinthians 8:2 that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality.*

*1 Timothy 6:18 Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share,*

What a contrast to the church at Laodicea, where the opposite was the case.

“I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked:”

Smyrna a poor, rich church; Laodicea was a rich, poor church. Jesus says I know what setbacks you have embraced out of faithfulness. I see it, I know it.

Third, He knows their persecutors.

*... and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.*

Within the city of Smyrna were many Jewish people who chose to oppose the Christians there, and join in the persecutions. The religion of the Jews enjoyed a protected status, and many Jews looked on Christianity as a pseudo Judaism, and set to work in persecuting it.

John MacArthur said this of the Jews at Smyrna, “The Jews set out to slander the Christians. They slandered them for cannibalism, saying they eat flesh and drink blood. They slandered them for lust and immorality because they greeted one another with a holy kiss and held love feasts. They slandered

them for home wrecking because one member of a home became a Christian and it brought a sword into the household. They slandered them for atheism because they rejected the worship of emperors and the deities of Rome.”

Jesus says, they claim to be Jews, but they are not really. Remember what Paul says in Romans 2:

*Romans 2:28 For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: 29 But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.*

*Romans 9:6 For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel:*

Yes, they go to a synagogue, but it is actually a synagogue of Satan, because that's whose work they are doing, and that's who they are aligning themselves with, in opposing the spread of the Gospel.

This passage is not ganging up on all Jewish people everywhere. It's simply speaking of a reality that was then, and still is today. The truth is, it is not simply Jewish people jealous to protect their religion. The church has always been persecuted by those religious groups that allied with the evil world system. Mark my words, when a religious group came to be under the pay and protection of government, problems began. Whenever any religion embraces the spirit of the age, and imbibes the attitudes of the culture, it goes from persecuted to persecutor. And pretty soon, those claiming to be Christian end up persecuting Christians. Just read, Foxe's "Book of Martyrs", or E.H. Broadbent's "The Pilgrim Church".

But all of this Jesus says as affirmation, as commendation. I know you are suffering these things. And take special note, this is the only church of which Jesus has nothing negative to say. There is no condemnation, no rebuke, no warning at all. Suffering tends to have that purifying effect.

Many of the Romanian pastors who lived through communism have said that twenty years of Western secularism have done more damage to their churches than 40 years of communist persecution ever did. Suffering purifies.

## **II. Christ's Counsel**

*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.*

*These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life:*

Jesus then gives them some counsel which was like rather bitter medicine. He says, don't fear. More suffering is coming and it is coming in this form: Satan will throw some of you in prison. This will test you. It is a word with dual meanings. From Satan's point of view, it is a temptation to give up the faith. From God's point of view, it is a test to prove that their faith is genuine.

Just as it was with Job. Satan wanted his trial to turn into a renouncing of God. God wanted it to be that which caused him to come forth as gold. That's why God, sovereign over even Satan, can allow Satan to use temptation for his rebellious purposes, while still using it for His own holy purposes.

Jesus says a trial is coming for ten days. All kinds of interpretation is put on this: ten periods of persecutions, ten years of persecution under Diocletian. It may simply mean a limited period of time, and it is actually used that way in Scripture. That's actually comforting because it says, Jesus is in control of the duration of this trial. He knows how long it will last, and it will not last forever. It may end when your life ends, or it may end before then, but it will end. "Weeping may endure for a night but joy comes in the morning".

"He will not allow you to be tested beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it."

When a Christian knows that the trial is under Christ's control, that it will not spiral out of control, it will not go on forever, there will be an end, he can be faithful. He can even be faithful to the end, knowing that the next thing he sees will be the face of Christ ready to reward him with a crown of life.

*James 1:12 Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him.*

Be faithful to the point of death, and you will have the crown of life.

One of the men who lived this out was alive at the time this letter was written. His name was Polycarp, and he was a disciple of the apostle John. He later became the pastor of the church at Smyrna. When he was very old, the vicious persecutions of Christians in Smyrna turned on him. He was arrested and told to deny Christ. He refused. He was brought into the stadium to be killed before the audience of unbelievers.

The Governor looked down on him and said, "Consider your age, and be sensible. Swear and say, Down with the Atheists" [meaning, the Christians]. Polycarp looked at the pagan audience in the stadium, and said, "Down with the Atheists." The governor said, Swear, reproach Christ, and I will release you.

Polycarp answered, "Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never once wronged me; how then shall I blaspheme my King, Who hath saved me?"

He was then committed to be burnt alive. When they came to nail him down to the pyre, he refused, saying that Christ would give him the strength to endure. It is said that the fires would not take, and the Romans eventually had to resort to stabbing him.

*Matthew 10:28 And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.*

Did you see what part of the vision from chapter 1 Jesus uses here to help the persecuted church at Smyrna? ' *These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life:*

The first and the last is a title belonging to God Himself. But this same eternal, sovereign God has gone through death, by joining to Himself a true human nature. And He rose again, praying for us. This is the comfort for a suffering church, and a suffering believer. There is something that no suffering can take away from you. There is something that no persecution, pain, or poverty can take from you: your eternal life in Christ, and your heavenly reward. And that becomes Christ's challenge.

### III. Christ's Challenge

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."*

Overcomers are not a special class of Christian, they are simply genuine Christians. Overcomers will not be hurt by the second death. What is that?

*Revelation 20:6 Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power; but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years.*

*Revelation 20:14 And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.*

*Revelation 21:8 But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.*

Overcomers will never see Hell. They will never experience eternal pain. They will never experience eternal poverty. They will never experience the equivalent of eternal persecution, in the form of eternal judgement and suffering.

All their pains, problems, poverty, persecutions will seem like a dream when in Heaven, when escaping the miseries of an eternity without God. This is why Paul says, "I consider the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us." And we could turn that around into a warning to those who would make this life their Heaven. "I consider the pleasures of this present time are not worthy to be compared to the sufferings which shall be experienced in us."

Sufferings of this life are nothing compared to the suffering of that place. People who have had a second birth will never face the second death. If you've been born twice, you will die only once. If you've been born only once, you will die twice.

Christ knows every suffering we experience for His name's sake. We don't have to adopt a siege mentality. Nor do we try to make this world our home. We trust in the First and the Last, the one who died and is risen. He sees; He knows. He is in control of the trial, and even of the Enemy. He will reward us with crowns and spare us from the Second Death. We are simply to be faithful to the very end.

That's what 2123 of our brothers and sisters did last year. They did it because they knew the truth of this letter, that old Christian truth which Jim Elliot summarised when he said "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose."