

The Persecuted Church

Scripture: Revelation 2:8-11

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People of God: Tonight we look at the church in Smyrna. It was an important seaport. Its harbor provided good protection from storms and from enemy attack. Smyrna was a proud and beautiful city, with a famous stadium, library and theater. In the days of the NT it had a population of about two hundred thousand people.

There was one aspect of this city for which it was well known—an aspect that has every bearing on this letter. That aspect was the city's loyalty to Rome. Rome was the center of a vast and powerful empire, controlled and directed by the emperor. Rome had to control many different nations and cities with brute force. But in some areas, the people welcomed Roman rule with open arms. Smyrna was one of those cities. It became the first city, outside of Rome itself, to build a temple in honor of the gods of Rome.

About twenty years before the birth of Christ, Smyrna applied to Rome for permission to build a temple to the emperor. Eleven different cities competed to have the honor and the privilege of being the center of worship for the emperor. Smyrna won out. The temple was build. As a result, this loyalty to Rome and the emperor was more than just a political allegiance, it was a religious allegiance.

In time worship of the emperor increased. It became more demanding. The expectations became that every person would express their allegiance to the emperor through worship. They would confess: Caesar is Lord. But this created a conflict with the good news of Jesus Christ. The gospel had reached this city probably during the third missionary journey of Paul, when Paul was based in Ephesus. At the heart of the gospel is the claim that Jesus

Christ is Lord. As a result, a conflict developed between these two rival claims. Who is Lord: Caesar or Christ? The Christians of Smyrna refused to participate in the temple worship of the emperor. As a result, they began to feel pressure and intimidation from city officials. Persecution steadily grew.

One well-known example of what happened to Christians in Smyrna is what happened to Polycarp. He was the leader of the church. In the year 156 AD--about 60 to 70 years after this letter was written, when Polycarp was an old man, he was thrown into the arena to be burned at the stake because he refused to say Caesar is Lord. Three times the Roman governor invited Polycarp to save his life: Curse Christ and I'll release you. Each time Polycarp answered: Eighty-six years have I served Christ and he has never done me wrong, how can I blaspheme him, my King, who has saved me? I am a Christian! With this answer, the governor became even angrier. The crowds yelled: Burn him. They gathered a great pile of wood. Polycarp told them it wasn't necessary to nail him to the stake--God would help him stand firm and endure the flames. Even as the flames were lit, Polycarp prayed to God: I praise you that you have judged me worthy of this day. And so Polycarp was burned at the stake, for his confession that Christ, not Caesar was Lord.

This type of persecution, which spread throughout the Roman Empire, did not come as a surprise to the church in Smyrna. Because she had been warned about the cost of following Jesus in this letter. In fact, when Christ wrote this letter the church was already beginning to experience persecution. Christ writes to them, acknowledging what they are suffering and assuring them the victory they have in him.

Christ says to them: *I know your afflictions and your poverty*. These are not two isolated descriptions of the church. Rather they are related. Because the one is the cause of the other. It was due to the discrimination the Christians faced that resulted in their poverty. Because they refused to go along with the worship of Rome and her emperor, because they followed the way of Christ rather than the way of their pagan culture some of them were fired from their jobs. Others had their property destroyed or vandalized. As a result, the church became economically poor. Christ knows this condition. He knows what they have sacrificed for the gospel.

In addition, he says: *I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan*. The church of Smyrna endured slander from those who should have welcomed the gospel with open arms. When the gospel spread from Jerusalem to the far reaches of the Roman Empire, it was always proclaimed first to the Jews. They were the people of God. They were God's chosen nation. Through them all the nations

of the world are blessed. And so even Paul, the missionary to the Gentiles, even he would preach first to the Jews. He would go to the local synagogue and preach about Jesus the Messiah. While many Jews did believe, others refused to accept the news that the Messiah had come into the world. These Jews made it difficult for believers. They stirred up trouble. They persecuted the Christians. As a result, Christ says that they are not really Jews but a synagogue of Satan.

And so, from two sides, the church endured slander and persecution. We're not told the specific slander in this specific city, but there were a number of common ones. Christians were accused of cannibalism. After all, in one of their secret ceremonies they were told to eat this body and drink this blood. Doesn't that sound like cannibalism to you? They were accused of lust, immorality and even incest. After all, the Christians said they loved another as brothers and sisters. Gossip described this love in sexual terms. The Roman officials even accused the Christians of atheism. After all, in the Roman view anyone who would refuse to worship the emperor and the other gods could not be religious.

Now of course, there was absolutely nothing true in these accusations. Christians were not cannibals but viewed life as given by God. They were not immoral but insisted on purity and faithfulness between husband and wife. They were not atheists but believed in the God who had revealed himself in Jesus Christ. Yet the church suffered as a consequence of these slanderous statements.

The church today continues to endure the slander of the world. In recent years, the cases of slander have increased in Canada. Often the touch point is on sexual ethics. As you defend the biblical, creational definition of marriage, you're accused of being homophobic. Christian Horizons is presently in the court system, defending its right to have a moral code for its employees to live up to. Our society promotes tolerance on nearly every thing, except it seems orthodox Christianity.

In other parts of the world, persecution is more forceful and violent. The worst cases are in Muslim countries. Saudi Arabia is a good example. Local citizens are not allowed to convert. Death is the punishment. Foreigners may worship in private. But that didn't stop the authorities from arresting a Filipino pastor, a few years ago, whose house church had grown too large. He was tortured over every part of his body. They wanted him to renounce the faith and give the names of other believers. He said: "Eventually I was so weak. I began to write the names of Billy Graham, Charles Spurgeon, and others. After a few days they were so mad because they'd been all over Saudi Arabia looking for these people." He was

scheduled to be executed. It was only through high-level intervention that he was deported instead.

The church today endures the slander of the world, even deadly persecution. Christ knows this. He knew how the church in Smyrna was falsely accused. He warns them of even further tribulation: *I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days.* The story of Polycarp is an indication of what the church of Smyrna soon faced. Yet the reference to ten days indicates that this persecution would not last. In fact, it was not the church that collapsed and disappeared. It was the Roman Empire. Eventually, it would be the church that held society together. But in the meantime, the church could expect difficulty. As a result, Christ calls them to endure. He says: *Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. Be faithful even to the point of death.*

Christ could have confidence in his church in Smyrna. She was spiritually strong. This is indicated by what is not said. To this church Christ has no harsh words to say. Of the seven churches, there were only two to which Christ had no words of correction. Smyrna was one of them. There was nothing to criticize. Not that this church was perfect, but that it had no major faults to correct. What a blessing that is!

Christ also says the church was rich. Despite their afflictions and poverty, they were really rich. Though physically poor they were spiritually rich. Though looked down upon by the rest of the city, the church received the blessings of God. Though they were the objects of slander, they received the love of the Lord. The wealth of a congregation is not determined by the size of its budget, but by its willingness to serve the Lord, no matter what the personal cost.

Is that how we measure our riches? It's not in our great facility, nor in our personal wealth, but in what Christ gives to the church. In him, we are rich beyond our wildest dreams.

To the persecuted church, Christ comes with comfort. There is comfort in the opening address of Jesus: *These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.* Christ is the first and the last. By this title the church is reminded that Christ existed even before the creation of the world. He will endure long past this earth coming to an end. He is in control of all things in between. Therefore, though the church goes through a rough period of time, Christ remains firmly in control. He cannot be shaken.

Moreover, Christ is he who died and came to life again. The cross reminds the church that the gospel is not without suffering. But the empty grave reminds the church of the victory over death and hell. Just as Christ

was victorious over death so too Christians can face martyrdom knowing that the victory has been won.

There is comfort in the words: *Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.* The reference here to the wreath that was given to the victors at the games. It was the prize that was given to those who won at the sporting events. The wreath was a small band that was worn on the head. Like a gold medal given at the Olympic games. Christ comforts the church by reassuring them that as they are faithful to him, even if that faithfulness results in their death, they will have won the prize. Their prize, their wreath, is life--eternal life.

This comfort is reinforced by the final words to this church: *He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.* As the last chapters of Revelation tell us, the second death is the lake of fire, the destination of those who are wicked. It is the place where those who have rejected Christ will spend eternity. The second death is hell. Christ assures his church that he who overcomes, he who remains faithful to Christ will not be hurt by the second death. Instead everlasting life shall be theirs.

These are the words of comfort Christ provides for the church in tribulation. *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.* The church today needs to hear these words of challenge and comfort.

It is a word of challenge because it reminds us that the cost of following Jesus can be high. We are called to be faithful even to the point of death. Not that we are to actively seek out persecution. We are not to hope for the day when we could be killed for our faith. Instead, we can be thankful for the freedom we have to worship our God. We can be thankful for the opportunity to express our faith through various church and kingdom activities.

But we ought not to be surprised when the church encounters opposition. We should not be surprised when slanderous statements are made against the church. Persecution does come to the church. There are many parts of the world where believers can directly relate to what Christ says to the church in Smyrna.

And so the church also needs to hear these words of comfort. Christ knows their affliction—their tribulation. An affliction that will not last forever. Because the second death does not await the faithful follower of Jesus, but the crown of life. *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*