

*A Study of The Book of Revelation
Sermon # 4*

“The Fearful Church”
Revelation 2:8-11

*In the last message (8-24-14) we examined the Lord’s message to the first of the seven church of Asia – the church at Ephesus. We discovered that they had **“left their first love”** (2:4) and they were warned to remember what they had lost, repent and return to doing the first works of faith, Our attention now turns to Smyrna – which has the distinction of being one of the two churches that received only approval without any condemnation (Smyrna and Philadelphia).*

Smyrna is the modern city of Izmir, Turkey and is the second largest city in Turkey with a population of just over 4 million as of 2012. Smyrna is located on the coast of the Aegean Sea - 35 miles north of Ephesus. It had been founded about 1000 BC as a Greek colony and existed as a city of some renown until 600 BC when it was destroyed in war. The city lay in ashes for over 300 years until it was rebuilt according to plans laid out by Alexander the Great. It was one of the first planned cities in the world.

“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.””

The name of the second church is Smyrna which means myrrh – which was a perfume derived by crushing the resin of a small thorn bush - and thus represents a picture of persecution and suffering. Suffering has marked the Church from the beginning. Those who initially followed Jesus rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer for His name (Acts 5:41). Of the original Apostles, Only two did not die a martyr's death: John died of extreme old age in Ephesus, after being persecuted, thrown in a vat of flaming oil from which he miraculously came out of without any burns, and banished to Patmos. Judas Iscariot, after betraying his Lord, hanged himself.

The rest died as martyrs in spreading the Gospel. In records outside of the Bible we learn the fate of each of the Apostles.

- *Peter was crucified, head downward, during the persecution of Nero.*
- *Andrew died on a cross at Patrae, in Achaia, a Grecian Colony.*
- *James, the younger brother of the Savior, was thrown from a pinnacle of the Temple, and then beaten to death with a club.*
- *Bartholomew was flayed alive in Albanapolis, Armenia.*
- *James, the elder son of Zebedee, was beheaded at Jerusalem, by order of Herod. He was the first martyred disciple.*
- *Thomas, the doubter, was run through the body with a lance at Coromandel, in the East Indies.*
- *Philip was hanged against a pillar at Heropolis (Abyssinia).*
- *Thaddeus was shot to death with arrows.*
- *Simon died on a cross in Persia (now Iran).*

In the dispensational view this church represents the persecuted church (AD 100-312).

First, The Commendation. (2:8-9)

“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.”

It is appropriate then that Jesus addresses Himself to them the same way He addressed Himself to John when he fell down as dead at His feet. He give them the assurance right from the start of the letter that He has already won the victory over death, and through Him all Christians can be assured that no matter if the are persecuted and even die for Jesus, they will live again with Him forever.

Perhaps the most precious of the Lord's assurances to the churches is to the suffering church at Smyrna. He says, “I know your works, tribulation, and poverty...” (v. 9) When the Lord says that He “knows” - the sense is that he understands, because He has been through it all Himself and therefore He can meet whatever needs may come. His tribulation was unto death, and His poverty was such that when He died, He possessed nothing other than the clothing he wore and even that was taken away from Him (robe – gambled for). The writer of Hebrews says, “For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. (16) Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and grace to help in time of need.”(Hebrews 4:15-16)

The church is commended for three things.

- *For Enduring **Tribulations**. (v. 9)*

*This literally spoke of enduring crushing pressure. It was not an easy thing to be a Christian in Smyrna. The church was as they say, “**up against it!**” Whenever Christianity goes really public with it stands in a pagan world, the opposition labels us not just as mistaken but as dangerous and evil. The enemies of the faith in Smyrna were aggressive and cruel. At least part of the persecution came from their refusal to be a part of the Roman emperor. There was a temple to Emperor Tiberius in Smyrna but the Christians refusal to sprinkle incense on the fire that burned before the bust of the Emperor or to call Caesar “Lord” was seen as a disgraceful lack of patriotism.*

Historically we know that Christians in the first 300 years of the Church’s existence were often subject to persecution. Christian’s were blamed for every bad thing that happened in society and they became the “scapegoats” of their day. Some of the afflictions of the believers are mentioned in the book of Hebrews.

“Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. (33) Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. (34) You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the

confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.”

(Hebrews 10:32-34 NIV)

*“When the Emperor Valens threatened Eusebuis with confiscation of all his goods, torture, banishment, or even death, the courageous Christian replied, **“He needs not fear confiscation, who has nothing to lose; nor banishment, to whom heaven is his country; nor torments, when his body can be destroyed at one blow; nor death, which is the only way to set him at liberty from sin and sorrow.”***

[www.bible.org/illustration/eusebuis]

- *For Enduring Poverty. (v. 9)*

*According to history Smyrna was a prosperous city, yet the Christians were poor. In fact the word used for **“poverty”** (**ptocheia**) indicates abject poverty. The church at Smyrna should be contrasted with the church at Laodicea (Rev 3:17) this church was poor in earthly goods but they are spiritually rich (2 Cor. 6:10). Their poverty may be attributable at least in part to the fact that many were disinherited by their families and ostracized by the community for their faith. It is better to be poor and approved than rich and accused.*

“No man who knows Jesus is ever truly poor. No man without Jesus is ever truly rich. So what shall we say of Steve Jobs, the brilliant co-founder of Apple, the man whose inventions changed the world? As I type these words I have an iPhone 5 in my pocket. A few feet away

I have an Apple iPad.... Millions of people download millions of songs from iTunes. We store our data in the iCloud. We update Facebook and Twitter using Apple technology. All of it stems from the creative genius of Steve Jobs who after his recent death left behind a multi-billion dollar fortune.

Even while confessing my debt to Steve Jobs, let me point out the phrase "left behind." He left it all behind. All those Mac computers don't matter now. All those iPhones do him no good. All that money is no longer his. Steve Jobs has passed from this life where he was revered into another realm where he must answer to the God who made him. I make no pronouncements on his eternal destiny except to note that in all the praise for his justly-celebrated accomplishments, no one has offered the slightest reason to think that he was a Christian.

Whatever has happened to him and wherever he is, it has nothing to do with his great wealth while he was on the earth. If he thought he would disappear into nothingness, he was wrong. If he thought he could achieve Nirvana, he was wrong. If he thought his life on earth was the only life there is, he was wrong. His earthly wealth can protect him no more." [Ray Pritchard. "When Life Goes Bad" www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/when-life-goes-bad/]

Why is church attendance not more important in the lives of American Christians today? Perhaps a good part of the answer is precisely because we are NOT poor - we can afford to do other activities other than worship on Sunday's... the beach, the lake, fishing,

golfing, most anything we like. Worship become just one option among many and it often loses out.

- *For Enduring Slander. (v. 9)*

The church at Smyrna was out of step with the world but in step with Christ. Slander is never easy to bear and it always painful to be misunderstood.

There were six slanders commonly leveled against the early Church.

- *Because Communion was misunderstood they were suspected of cannibalism (eating flesh and drinking blood).*
- *Because of their common meal called the love feast they were suspected of sexual misconduct.*
- *Because the Christian faith sometimes divided families they were called anti-family.*
- *Because Christians refused to say “**Caesar is Lord**” they were labeled traitors.*
- *Because they taught that the whole world would end by fire they were called arsonist.*

*Jesus says “**I know your tribulation...I know your poverty...I know your slander.**” In the midst of difficult times it is easy to think God has forgotten. But Jesus knows.*

Second, The Counsel. (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.”

- Be Fearless – *“Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer...”* (v. 10a)

“Do not fear” is literally “stop being afraid” of what you may suffer. Christians can be fearless because ... God is in control of all our circumstances. God has set limits on what Satan can do in our lives. The persecution about to come against the Christians in Smyrna was from “the devil” (v. 10) but at the same time it was measured and limited by God.

*The tribulation of verse ten does not refer to common trial that come as a result of living as a human in fallen world. Vance Havner says, “**Some dear souls think they are bearing their cross every time they have a headache.**” The tribulation mentioned here is trouble that would not have happened had they not been Christians.*

Commentators hold various positions on the means of the “ten days” of persecution in verse ten. There are two ways in which it was fulfilled. Remember that the term day can refer to a single day or simply to a span of time.

(1) It could be talking about the end of Domitian's persecution, which lasted exactly ten years. In

both the book of Revelation and in the book of Daniel, years are signified by days.

(2) It could also be talking about the ten periods of imperial persecutions under the Roman emperors; the "first" was under Nero, (AD 64 or 66); the "second" was under Domitian, (AD 93); the "third" was under Trojan, (AD 104); the "fourth" was under Hadrian, (AD 125); the "fifth" was under Marcus Antonius, (AD 151); the "sixth" was under Septimius Severus, (AD 197); the "seventh" was under Maximinus, (AD 235-237); the "eighth" was under Decius, (AD 250); the "ninth" was under Valerianus, (AD 257); and the "tenth" was under Diocletian, (AD 303).

The day of martyrs is not over! All over the world Christians still face persecution, especially in Asia and in the Muslim World. And the Bible says one day persecution will come to those who stand firm in the faith, not wavering, not believing false doctrine. In that day believers will be persecuted, not only by the world, but sometimes by people who call themselves Christian. John Piper points out, "the opponents of Christianity are going to oppose us not by saying that we are wrong, but by saying that we are evil and dangerous -...anti-choice, anti-woman, anti-gay, anti-tolerance, anti-diversity etc. And they will do this in direct proportion to how public we are about the claims of Christianity..."

The ironic and tragic response of many Christians in that atmosphere of conflict is to simply disappear. And to think we are doing God a favor by stirring up no opposition to his name.” [John Piper. *“Things Are Worse Than and Better Than They Seem.”* www.desiringgod.org/sermons/things-are-worse-than-and-better-than-they-seem]

Why The Godly Suffer.

➤ *Discipline (1 Cor. 11:30-32)*

“For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. (31) For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. (32) But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world.” (1 Cor. 11:30-32)

➤ *To Prevent Pride. (2 Cor. 12:7)*

“And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. (2 Cor. 12:7)

➤ *To Teach. (Romans 5:3-5)*

“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.” (Romans 5:3-5)

➤ *To Purify. (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.” (1 Peter 1:6-7)

- *Be Faithful (v. 10b)*

“...Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

*Being a Christian is not a temporary assignment. For those who asked “**How Long?**” The Lord replied, “**All your Life – until Death!**” The incentive for continued faithfulness is to receive “*the crown of life.*” The reward is not eternal life, which is already possessed by putting one’s faith in Christ’s finished work on the Cross.*

*The Lord indicates that some in their number would die to their faith in Christ. And it happened. It is fascinating to consider that on the day that this letter was read to the congregation in Smyrna that there was a young man named Polycarp (A.D. 70-155) who listened. About 20 years later, he became the pastor of the church at Smyrna, faithfully carrying out this responsibility. As an old man, persecution became acute. Polycarp was brought before the Roman proconsuls who told him that he could go free “**if he***

*would swear by the emperor and curse Christ.” He replied, “For eighty-six years I have served him and he has done me no evil. How could I curse My king, who saved me?” With every threat Polycarp refused to deny Christ and be set free. After being tied to the post to be burned, he looked to Heaven, praying ‘LORD sovereign God....I thank you that you have deemed me worthy of this moment, so that, jointly with your martyrs, I may have a share in the cup of Christ...For this...I bless and glorify you. Amen.’ [Justo Gonzalez. **The Story of Christianity**. “Martyrdom of Polycarp” (Prince Press, 1994) p. 44]*

*There are two different Greek words for crown – one describes the kind of crown a king wore (**diadem**) and the other was the victory crown (**stephanos**). That is the kind of crown found here and it pictures someone who has completed an athletic event and they come and stand before the officials and give them a crown and say, “**You have finished the race. You have run a good race and here is your prize. Here is your crown**”*

Third, The Challenge. (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.”

*The challenge is to hear and heed and be an overcomer. The Lord says that the overcomer “**shall not***

*be hurt by the second death.” For the one born again the only death they will experience is the physical death. The first death is the natural death and we are all subject to this death. Someone once put it this way, **“All those born once, die twice and all those born twice die only once!”***

*The second death referred to the fate of the wicked in the next world – which we might call **“eternal death.”** Death here comes from the Greek word (**thanatos**) which literally means separation. The first separation is when we die physically. The second death or second separation is eternal separation from God. Revelation 21:8 describes it further, **“But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake with burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.”***

Conclusion

In closing I want you to note with me the six precious promises that the Lord makes to the Church at Smyrna that are just as true today.

- 1. Christ is the first and the last. His word is final.*
- 2. Christ died to conquer death.*
- 3. Christ knows your pain. He knows whatever you are going through.*
- 4. You are rich, in everything that matters.*

The church's suffering had made it strong, because it had stripped them of everything but Jesus Himself.

5. You will receive a crown of life.

6. The second death holds no terror for you.

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Revelation 2:8-11

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The church is commended for three things.

- For enduring tribulations. (Hebrews 10:32-34 NIV)
- For enduring poverty.
- For enduring slander.

Second, The Counsel. (2:10)

- Be Fearless.

Why The Godly Suffer.

- Discipline (1 Cor. 11:30-32)
- To Prevent Pride. (2 Cor. 12:7)
- To Teach. (Romans 5:3-5)
- To Purify (1 Peter 1:6-7)

- Be Faithful

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- For enduring _____ . (Hebrews 10:32-34)
- For enduring _____ .
- For enduring _____ .

Second, The Counsel. (2:10)

- Be _____ .
Why The Godly Suffer.
 - _____ (1 Cor. 11:30-32)
 - To Prevent _____ . (2 Cor. 12:7)
 - To _____ . (Romans 5:3-5)
 - To Provide _____ . (1 Peter 1:6-7)
- Be _____ .

Third, The Challenge. (2:11)

Six precious promises that are just as true today.

1. Christ is the first and the last. His word is _____ .

2. *Christ died to conquer _____.*
3. *Christ knows your _____. He knows whatever you are going through.*
4. *You are rich, in everything that _____.*
5. *You will receive a crown of _____.*
6. *The second death holds no _____ for you.*