

Hear What the Spirit Says Smyrna

We continue our series looking at the message of Jesus to the churches in Revelation. Remember it is some 60 years after Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension to heaven. The church has grown as the gospel message spread beyond its birthplace in Jerusalem. These seven churches are in what was then called Asia Minor, the country we know as Turkey.

Smyrna, the second of the seven churches Jesus' addresses, is located about 35 miles due north of Ephesus, the church we looked at last Sunday. Smyrna was one of the most prosperous cities of Asia Minor with excellent roads to the interior of the country and an excellent natural harbor on the Mediterranean. Now known as Izmir, it is still an impressive city, the third most populous city in Turkey, after Istanbul and Ankara with a population of almost 3 million. It is the second largest metropolitan area on the Aegean Sea, after Athens, Greece. As early as 195 BC a temple had been built in Smyrna personifying Rome as a goddess. Around 25 AD various cities were competing for the privilege of building a temple to the Emperor Tiberius and Smyrna won. The cult of Empire and Emperor were matters of great pride to the people of Smyrna and that meant trouble for the Christian citizens of the city as we will see. If Ephesus was a loveless church, Smyrna was a suffering church.

The Lord's message to the church at Smyrna is actually the shortest of the letters to the churches. Look at what he says. **“To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. I know your afflictions and your poverty – yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.” Revelation 2:8-11**

Notice the opening of the letter points back to the revelation of Jesus from chapter 1 – Jesus is the First and the Last, the one who died and came to life again. Not only does the opening point back to the ascended Jesus and his power as the one who rules and reigns over all, but it gives hope and comfort to a church that is persecuted and suffering and even facing death. Don't be afraid, I died and rose again and so will you!

Again Jesus begins with these words of comfort, “I know.” I know you, I know your afflictions and poverty, I know the slanderous words that are spoken about you, I know what you are going through and I know what you are facing. I know you and I am with you!

Can you hear him say that to you today? “I know you. I know what you’re facing and I’m with you.” Notice what Jesus said and what he didn’t say. He did not say, “I know you’re facing affliction and poverty but if you’ll just speak the word everything will clear up for you.” He did not correct or rebuke them. “Obviously there is unrepentant sin in your life and that’s why these things are happening to you. Repent!” He didn’t tell them “Don’t worry. I’m here now and I’m going to fix everything so you won’t have any more trouble.” In fact, he tells them more trouble is coming. But he comforts them with his presence and assures them of ultimate victory in the midst of their trouble. Let’s look at what they were enduring for His sake.

He knows their affliction. He is talking about persecution. We know the Emperor had issued an edict that declared emperor worship as mandatory for inhabitants of the Roman Empire. It was compulsory that at certain times of the year each citizen would sprinkle incense on the altar before a statue of Caesar and declare that Caesar was lord. Christians refused to do so. Jesus was lord and to declare any other as lord would be idolatry. Their refusal made them appear unpatriotic as well as disloyal.

He knows their poverty. Smyrna was a prosperous town, but apparently not for the Christians. Perhaps one reason they lived in poverty was because they shared their resources with the poor and the underprivileged in the city. But since Jesus linked affliction and poverty together, it seemed likely their poverty was due to their faith and allegiance to Christ. The Jews and the pagans were unwilling to trade with them. They were denied employment or advancement on jobs. They were having to do without and yet they still would not offer incense to Caesar or declare him Lord. They remained faithful.

Notice Jesus says “I know your poverty – yet you are rich!” The economy and perspective of heaven is always the opposite of this world. By the world’s standards the church at Smyrna was destitute, poor, but by heaven’s standards they were rich – rich in God’s blessing, rich in his mercy and favor. Materially they were poor, but they were laying up treasures in heaven because of their faithfulness and allegiance to Jesus in the face of persecution.

He knows they are being slandered. The church was being opposed by many of the Jews in the city. It is likely the church in Smyrna was made up of both Jewish and non-Jewish

believers in Christ. The Jewish members of the synagogue viewed Jewish followers of Jesus as heretics and enemies of Judaism. They saw them as having rejected the teachings of Moses and the Jewish faith when they embraced Jesus as Messiah. An example of the kind of slander Jesus is referring to is mentioned in Acts 17. Jews in Thessalonica had started a riot and made these accusations to the Roman authorities. **“These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here...They are all defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.” Acts 17:6-7**

The Jews, thinking they were stopping the spread of a Jewish heresy, slandered all the followers of Jesus. Jesus uses this strong language and calls them a synagogue of Satan. I understand that certainly sounds anti-Semitic. Of course the prophets had said harsher things to the Jewish people as had Jesus, but let me say a word about this. The Jews in Smyrna that were slandering the believers had rejected Christ and had aligned themselves with Rome in this instance. Jesus, in calling them a synagogue of Satan, is saying they’ve been deceived by Satan and are being used by him to achieve his wicked goals. By their actions they are in a sense serving Satan, the one whom the bible calls a slanderer and an accuser of the believers. Jesus made the statement about these Jews who were acting as enemies against the believers in Smyrna, but he did not speak in hatred, nor did he call for persecution or ridicule or slander in return. Jesus longed to see his people, the Jews, come to faith. Remember he was sent first to the house of Israel.

Tension and misunderstandings between Christians and Jews grew more intense over the next few centuries. Sadly, anti-Semitism, persecution and hatred of the Jews found a place in the church and that never should have been. Jesus was a Jew. The twelve disciples were Jewish. With the exception of the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, the entire bible was written by Jews. The early church was Jewish. The roots of our faith are in Judaism. Jesus was an obedient and observant Jew as were the disciples. Anti-Semitism has no place in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. The church needs to repent for centuries of mistreatment of the Jews. The apostle Paul said **“My heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge.” Romans 10:1-2** Our desire and prayer must be for Jewish people to be saved. We have a responsibility to love all people. There is no place for hatred and slander in the life of a follower of Christ, not against Jews, not against muslims, not against anyone. Think

about that before your next Facebook post! We aren't called to slander our enemies but to love them.

The church was being slandered. Jesus had been slandered and he knew how painful it was. The church today is being slandered and spoken against. Our standards and biblical values are being labeled as anti-choice, anti-intellectual, anti-tolerance, anti-diversity. The more public we are about our faith and our standards, the more we will be slandered. We won't just be labeled as mistaken, but sadly we will be labeled as evil and dangerous. But let me say, the way the church must respond is not with our own style of slander. We aren't called to give it back harder. We are called to love, to forgive. Jesus said **“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven...Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.” Matthew 5:11, 44.** Love and prayer is our response, not slander and mockery and hate.

Jesus knew about their affliction, their poverty, the slander they were enduring. He doesn't tell them he is about to deliver them. Instead he says “Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer.”

He knows their suffering. For the first 1900 years of the Christian faith it was understood that suffering was a part of following Jesus. When he said “take up your cross and follow me”, it was understood there would be sacrifice and suffering. Jesus said, **“In this world you will have trouble.” John 16:33.** It goes with living in a fallen, sinful world and salvation doesn't change that. Paul wrote, “everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” 2 Timothy 3:12. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor/theologian who was hanged by the Nazis said, **“Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ, and it is therefore not at all surprising that Christians should be called upon to suffer...” Dietrich Bonhoeffer**

The preaching and proclamation of the gospel always provokes opposition. People don't want to be confronted with the truth about their own sinfulness and pride, their need of salvation and a Savior. The moral standards of God's word, the holy life he calls us to, that too provokes opposition from a world that wants to live as they please. Calling people to a biblical lifestyle of honesty in business, integrity in your personal life and conversation and behavior, chastity before marriage and fidelity in marriage, self-control and self-sacrifice – not exactly welcomed in our

culture. This is the gospel. This is the gospel the church of Smyrna preached and for which they were suffering. John Stott writes, **“Smyrna was a suffering church because it was an uncompromising church.”** ...**John Stott** Let that sink in! They were suffering and Jesus says, “Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer.” Things were going to heat up. Suffering was coming but don’t be afraid. I’ve got a feeling he is saying that to the members of his church in many parts of the world today, including the USA.

He tells them the devil will put some of you in prison to test you and you will suffer persecution for ten days. He lets them know the true enemy is not the Jews or the Roman authorities but the devil, the enemy of our soul. Revelation makes plain there is a real devil who wars against the purposes and the people of God. He is the one ultimately behind the trouble. He tempts in order to cause us to stumble, to fall, to fail. Jesus uses the word testing. “The devil will put some of you in prison to test you.” Jesus encourages them that rather than defeating them, the testing will prove their strength. Testing is like tea bags in water, it will draw out and reveal what you are really made of. Don’t be afraid of hot water.

That word test suggests there is purpose in all of this. We may not understand it, not until we are in heaven, but God still works in all things, working it for our good and for his glory. He is still redeeming every situation. The devil means it for evil, to destroy, but God works it for our good, to refine, to draw out the gold, to strengthen our faith.

The church was facing tribulation, testing. Jesus says “you will suffer persecution for ten days.” He doesn’t mean ten literal days. He is saying the testing, the hardship will only be for a season. This test, this trial is temporary. Remember that. The bible says, “Weeping may endure for a night but joy comes in the morning!”

Trouble is coming and Jesus doesn’t offer a solution or promise to magically make it all disappear. Instead, his word to them is what we have heard him say again and again. What he said to John in the first chapter. “Do not fear.” **“Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer...Be faithful, even to the point of death and I will give you the crown of life.”**

Revelation 2:10

This is his message to us, whether we are facing sickness, darkness, depression, or death itself. Do not be afraid. Be faithful, i.e., have faith, keep the faith. Fear is displaced by faith. Faith banishes fear. Bryan Davenport said **“Fear is what the horizon looks like if there is no God.”** ...**Bryan Davenport** Fear imagines the future without God’s presence, without his

promise, without his power, but that is not our future. He knows us and our circumstances and He is with us. We may suffer, but He is with us and that means we shouldn't fear.

But suffering! Trouble! Persecution! Slander! Poverty! Sickness! It's all scary stuff. I know, more importantly, He knows and he is with us. He knows and he is the First and the Last. He is eternal. He is already in your tomorrow making a way through the trouble. He's got this.

"Trouble is coming. Some of us may die!" That's what Jesus is implying when he says be faithful to the point of death. You may die for the faith. Yes, but Jesus said "I am the First and the Last, the one who died and came to life again." Jesus is the victor, the one who conquered death, the one who has the keys to life and death and the grave. Everyone else lives and then they die. Jesus lived and then died and then lives, forever. He has the final word and he says "Do not be afraid. Just be faithful!"

"Persecution is coming." I know and so does He. He knows everything and he will show us the way to walk through it. Trouble is coming, but it is only for a season. Ten days he said. That means he has set an end to the trouble. That means Jesus is in control. It isn't going to last 11 days because he has set a limit. He has the final word. "It's just for a little while you'll have to endure, and I'll be with you, but look what is coming: the crown of life!"

The church at Smyrna was familiar with the victor's crown that was given to the winner of the games. Jesus says be faithful and you will win the victor's crown and it's a crown of life. Everlasting life! The church heard it like the voice of a coach urging on the athlete, like the fans in the crowd cheering them on. "Keep going. You're almost home. You can make it. Don't be afraid, don't give up, the finish line is just ahead and the crown of life is waiting for you!"

But what if we die? Isn't that the ultimate fear? Some of those church members would die for the faith. Remember, Jesus is the one who died and came to life again. Because he lives we shall live also. He says, **"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death."** Revelation 2:11

He who overcomes, the one who keeps the faith and stays true to Jesus, won't be hurt at all by the second death. What does that mean? The first death is natural death that comes to all life on this planet at some point. We will all die someday. This is the death of the body and Jesus has already assured us he has conquered death. For the believer we die to live on in his presence. John tells us about the second death in Revelation 20. **"Then death and Hades were**

thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire." Revelation 20:14-15

The second death is referring to hell, the eternal end of those who reject Jesus as Savior and Lord and refuse to follow him. Jesus says if you follow me and remain faithful, even through death, to the end of life, you have nothing to fear of the second death.

Jesus is telling us to live unafraid of death, unafraid of loss. He is telling them there may be martyrdom coming, some will lay down their life for Jesus. But don't live in fear. Live in faith and live for him even in the face of testing and trial and persecution. Don't wait until persecution comes to start living that kind of faithful, surrendered, disciplined life. To Smyrna, to Carbondale, to the church of Jesus Christ – Do not be afraid. Live for Jesus!

One last story. At the time of the writing of this letter there was a young man in the church at Smyrna, a disciple of John whose name you may have heard, Polycarp. He may have been the pastor since some records indicate he was consecrated the Bishop of Smyrna by John himself. Some 60 years after this letter was sent to the church, around 156, Polycarp, now in his eighties was arrested and brought before the Roman authorities in the amphitheater in Smyrna. His congregation had begged him to leave the city and hide which he had done but the authorities tracked him down. When they found him he offered food and drink to his captors and asked for permission to pray for a while before they led him away.

Remember, he had heard those words from Jesus, "be faithful unto death." They brought him into the amphitheater in front of the crowds of people. The Roman proconsul said, "Respect your years. Swear by the genius of Caesar" asking him to demonstrate his loyalty to Caesar as God. "Repent! Say, 'Away with the atheists'." That's what the Christians were called, atheists, because they didn't believe in the gods of Rome. Polycarp looked at all this crowd gathered in the amphitheater, there to cheer on his death and the deaths of other Christians. He looked up into the crowd, waved his hand at them and then looked up to heaven, groaned and said, "Away with the atheists." Meaning all of them. The Proconsul again said "Swear and I will release you; curse the Christ!" Polycarp then said, "For eighty-six years I have served him and he has done me no wrong; how then can I blaspheme my King who saved me." The proconsul said, "I have wild beasts. If you will not change your mind, I will throw you to them." Polycarp said, "Send them..." The Proconsul said, "Since you make light of the beasts I will have you destroyed by fire unless you repent and change your attitude." Polycarp said, "You threaten the fire that burns

for an hour and is in a little while quenched. You know not of the fire of the judgment to come and the fire of eternal punishment reserved for the ungodly. Why delay? Bring what you will!” When they went to tie Polycarp to the stake to burn him alive he said, “You do not need to bind me to the stake. I will stay here by myself.” The fire was lit but the wind began to blow and drove the flames away from him. Finally, a soldier put an end to his suffering with a spear. He reportedly said at the end, “I bless you Father for judging me worthy of this hour, so that in the company of the martyrs I may share the cup of Christ.”

Dottie Rambo paraphrased Polycarp like this, “All these years I’ve served him, he’s done me nothing but good, I won’t repent and I won’t recant, just tell me why I should cause he ain’t never, done me nothing, done me nothing but good.”

Things looked bad for Smyrna, for Polycarp, or did they? Actually, things looked pretty good for them and for us. Look again. Look beyond the trouble. Look beyond the temporal. Jesus is with us, he is alive forevermore having conquered death and he will have the last and final word. Trouble may come but it’s only for a season and he is in control. He knows what we are facing but he declares we are rich in the riches of Christ Jesus and he will supply all of our needs according to his riches. There may be trouble ahead, but in a little while we will stand in his presence and he will present to us the crown of life, the victor’s crown. We won’t be touched by the second death so the first death can’t scare us because Jesus has already conquered the grave. Don’t be afraid. He is the first and the last, he has overcome and so can we. Hear what the Spirit says to the church. He may not pull us out of the fire, but He has promised to see us through! Don’t be afraid, keep trusting him because He ain’t never done me nothing but good and He’s not about to change things now! If you’re suffering, don’t be afraid. He will see you through. He’ll make a way where there seems to be no way. Trust him!