

## Smyrna - The Suffering Church

### Revelation 2:8-11

Let's look at the Lord's letter to the church of Smyrna - the suffering church. Forbearing is never easy, but God calls all believers to it at some point, and it has its purpose. What could possibly be the purpose of suffering? One is found in Romans 8:16, 17, *The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs... joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.* Our suffering helps us better associate with Jesus and then be glorified with Him. Another reason given in Scripture is that we can be molded, and changed, and made more like Him. None of this is fun, but the result is worth it. For example, a bar of steel is valued at five dollars. When it is formed into horseshoes, it becomes worth \$10. When it is made into needles, it is now worth \$350, but when crafted into delicate watch springs, it is valued at \$250,000. The more the steel is cut down, heated in the furnace, hammered and manipulated, beaten and pounded, the more valuable it becomes. We are no different.

Smyrna was 35 miles north of Ephesus on a gulf of the Aegean Sea, and is currently known as Izmir. It was the crown city of Asia because its acropolis or highest point was encircled with flowers, myrtle trees, and shrubbery. No doubt its beauty and circular formation added to its naming. It was the second most important city in Asia after Ephesus, partly because of its location on the water, creating constant trade and commerce, making it a rich city. It was adorned with beautiful buildings and temples to Zeus (believed to be the chief god), Cybele (the mother goddess of nature), Aphrodite (the goddess of fertility), Apollo (the god of prophecy, music, and intellect), Asclepius (the god of health), Bacchus (the god of alcohol or drinking), and even to Caesar Tiberius. The caesars, or emperors, often declared themselves to be gods. It was a cultural center, which hosted special music venues and events in a stadium for these specific functions. It was in this very stadium that the church father and their pastor, Polycarp, was put to death for refusing to renounce Jesus.

Smyrna means *bitter*, and *myrrh*, which is a sweet-smelling tree resin that released its fragrance when crushed. How appropriate in light of what Smyrna was going through. The Lord warns them they will be tested or crushed by Satan. If they stand strong and do not deny Him, they will be greatly rewarded. As they are crushed for their faith, they will produce a sweet fragrance for the Lord. He goes on to explain that some of them will be put to death, which is interesting since myrrh was used as an embalming agent. They were a holy church and closely walking with the Lord, and because of this had a great anointing. Myrrh was also used as an anointing oil. We can see how the Lord was using their name to make clear their call and what He was doing in them. So pure was this church that there was no rebuke from the Lord for them, only encouragement to keep going and endure hardships like good soldiers. If there is anything that suffering must produce, it is purification of the believer.

Smyrna was also known for its schools of rhetoric and philosophy. There was much intellectualism, which explains the worship of Apollo. This would have led to further opposition of the church because of the simplicity in Christ. Unbelieving intellectuals often get upset with Christians, because with intellectualism comes pride in man's achievements. Pride in man's achievements will always lead to a rejection of God's works.

In verse eight, Jesus again identifies Himself as, *the First and the Last, Who was dead and came to life.* Why would this be an important identifier to the church of Smyrna? Well, it seemed more than once that Smyrna would die and disappear, but each time the city resurrected. In fact, it is still around today as Izmir. Since they would have tribulation, and some would be put to death, remembering Jesus' death and resurrection would be an encouragement. As He rose again, so would they. Here is their hope and purpose in suffering, even as it should be for us if we ever have to suffer for His Name. Things come into perspective when you are facing suffering or death, especially if you are facing it for the sake of Jesus. How so? We may die physically, but as followers of Christ we will be resurrected again to eternal life! Could this have been a swipe at the Mother Nature goddess, Cybele? She supposedly controlled the yearly cycles of death in the winter and life or resurrection in the spring. The Lord was saying He alone was the One Who died and resurrected, and He was the One Who alone controls death and resurrection.

Our introduction is also a reminder that Jesus could associate with them in their poverty and persecution. Remember He said He had no place to lay His head. His persecution unto death was clear for all to see, bringing great encouragement to them.

The Lord tells Smyrna (as He did Ephesus) that He knows them in their works, but now He adds tribulation into the mix. He is not speaking of the Great Tribulation, which will be far worse, but of tribulation that all Christians are susceptible to in this world. Jesus says in John 16:33, *These things I have spoken to you that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.* Every Christian will experience some form of worldly tribulation because we are in this world, but it is significantly different from the Great Tribulation of God. The former is a result of living in a fallen and sinful world. The latter is God's wrath and judgment on a Christ-rejecting world.

Scripture identifies three different kinds of wrath:

- **Man's or the world's**
- **Satan's**
- **God's**

Although man's and Satan's are not good things, they are nothing compared to God's. Why is this such an important distinction? The church has been experiencing man's and Satan's wrath since the fall in the Garden of Eden. The true church will never experience God's wrath in the Great Tribulation. 1 Thessalonians 5:9 says, *For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.* The word *appoint* is the key since all people have an appointment with God. The world is appointed to His wrath. His followers are appointed to His grace and mercy.

Jesus knows their poverty, but in reality they are rich. The word *poverty* means *destitute or living as a beggar*. They had nothing materially but were considered rich because of their position in the Spirit. These are the most important riches any of us could have. Though we have no monetary wealth, we are the richest people in the world because we have God. The word *rich* means *to be full with all you need*. That is being filled with the Spirit. It may appear you have needs, but you are full of everything truly needed in order to be complete and satisfied. Why was there such poverty among the church in Smyrna? As a center for Caesar worship, everyone was required to pinch incense to this ruler and worship him. The Christians had to decline. If you refused, it was not just verbal persecution, but also physical; if not physical, it would be financial. How so? You were not allowed to join the working guilds, like present-day unions, and hence you could not work. It would not take long to become destitute.

Jesus says He knows the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews, but in reality, they are a synagogue of Satan. Blasphemy is giving God the greatest insult possible. What was blasphemous about these false Jews? They pretended to love and honor God while dishonoring and insulting Him by rejecting His Son Jesus. Religious Jews do the same today. Not only were they insulting God by their rejection of Jesus, but they were also siding with the world in Smyrna and ganging up on the believers. What makes someone a true Jew, or in our case, a true believer? It is not by lineage or earthly birth, but by heavenly birth or being born again. They claimed to be biblical Jews, or true believers, but their actions proved they were not. That was an insult to God. It was satanically inspired, hence, a synagogue of Satan. Anyone can claim to be a follower of God, but by their actions the truth is revealed. He does not seek perfection, but a true heart after God.

He tells them, in verse ten, that they are about to suffer but not to fear. They saw what was happening and were afraid. We can only imagine what it is like to be facing physical persecution. Scripture and history have proven that the Lord gives grace when Christians come into such situations. You may not have what is needed to face it ahead of time, but you will when you are called to it. The Lord tells them to stop worrying and being afraid. He will see them through and give the grace needed to overcome.

He informs them how and why they are going to suffer. They will be thrown into prison, and Satan is behind it. Even though some would be literally thrown into prison, this is referring to any type of suffering prison Satan could

bring into their lives. He does the same to us. There are often times when bad things happen, and we tend to wonder why God is doing this. Yet we see it is often not God, but Satan, and God is allowing it to test us. He says they will be tested for 10 days, the number in Scripture of God's divine order. It is God's divine order that we suffer so we can grow, be a testimony unto Him, and a witness to others.

Finally, He tells them to be faithful unto death, and if they are, they will receive the crown of life. If they are not afraid to die for their faith, they will receive eternal life. This is another reason why Jesus addressed Himself to them as *Him Who was dead and is now alive*. What kind of suffering did they endure? According to secular history, they were fed to wild animals, boiled in oil and hot wax, impaled on poles, and burned at the stake.

He ends by telling them that if they obey this command, they have no need to fear the second death. What is that? The first death is physical; the second death is spiritual. All will die physically once, but only those who die without Christ will die twice. They will die physically and spiritually. It is best said this way: If we are born twice, we will die once; if we are born once, we will die twice.

Which is it for you? Have you been born a second time? Jesus said unless you are born again you cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but if you are, eternal life with Him awaits. Or are you suffering today? Don't let it go to waste; allow God to use it to bring you closer to Him.

**Group Study and Personal Application Questions:**

1. All believers are called to suffering at some point. What are the two purposes of suffering given?
2. What does the word *Smyrna* mean and how is this meaning appropriate in light of what Smyrna was going through?
3. Why did this church not receive a rebuke from the Lord?
4. V8 – Jesus identifies Himself as “the First and the Last, Who was dead and came to life.” Why is this an important identifier to the church in Smyrna?
5. How does facing suffering or death for the sake of Jesus put things into perspective?
6. V9 – In spite of the works found in the church of Smyrna, they still were under tribulation. What three kinds of tribulation (wrath) are identified in the Scriptures? Which two may we be subject to?
7. The church in Smyrna was materially poverty-stricken, but still considered rich. How so?
8. Why was there such poverty in the church in Smyrna?
9. Jesus identifies those who said they were Jews but were truly a synagogue of Satan, saying He knew their blasphemy. How were they blasphemous? How is someone a true Jew (or believer)?
10. V10 – Jesus told the church they were going to suffer but they were not to fear. How and why were they going to face this?
11. Though Christians in America are not facing death for their faith, many in the world are. Have you ever thought of how you would fare faced with that situation? What does God give the believer when they are fearful in the face of suffering and death?
12. What is the significance of the number of days they were to be tested?
13. V11 – What is the promise for those who remained faithful unto death?
14. What is the second death?
  - Which is it for you? Have you been born once or twice?