

Postcards – Church at Smyrna

2/9/20

Revelation 2:8-11

Sunday AM

I heard a funny story this week about (3) friends who went hunting – a pastor, a lawyer, and a doctor. As fate would have it, a deer happened onto the scene and all (3) men took their best shot falling the deer. When they arrived at the scene, it was obvious only one of them had hit their mark – but each decided to take credit for the kill. After arguing for a few min., they decided to bring in a forensic scientist to determine who had shot the deer. After careful examination, the FS said, “It’s obvious to made the shot. The lawyer quickly claimed that it was him, then the doctor, but the FS said – “No, it was the pastor.” The other (2) men asked, “How can you be so sure?” The FS replied, “B/c like his sermons, the bullet went in one ear and out the other.”

As we continue our series today in the (7) churches of revelation, it’s my hope *what’s taught doesn’t go in one ear and out the other*, but penetrates our hearts.

Last week we began a series on the (7) churches in Revelation by looking at the church at Ephesus – which from the outside-in looked great, but from the inside-out was losing her first love. Today, we’re going to look at the 2<sup>nd</sup> church – Smyrna.

Smyrna was located some 35 miles north of Ephesus on the Aegean Sea and also was a prosperous port city known as the *Crown City* or *Flower of Asia*.

Like Ephesus, Smyrna was a *free city*, allowing them to govern themselves; yet, the people were intensely loyal to Rome and fully engaged in the worship of the Caesar b/c they were indebted to Rome for rebuilding the city after a devastating earthquake.

The city was also known for the production of *myrrh* – which was used as a fragrance by the living and as an embalming agent for the dead. You might remember that myrrh was one of the gifts offered to Jesus at His birth. Interestingly, the word myrrh means *bitter* – and often, was associated w/ suffering/death.

B/c suffering/death was what the church in Smyrna experienced. After, Emperor Domitian made it a capital offense to refuse to bow/pay homage to Caesar – the people of Smyrna saw it as their duty to persecute anyone who refused – thus the church in Smyrna suffered severely for their refusal to bow to Caesar.

Which brings us to the heart of the lesson today – we must stand firm for Christ not out of *convenience* or *comfort*, or but out of *conviction* and *commitment* – no matter what we might come up against.

But let’s state the obvious – no one wakes up w/ the ambition to suffer! Yet, Jesus said that suffering will be unavoidable! B/c we live in a fallen world that’s obstinately opposed to God, those who do believe will face the hostility from those who refuse to bend their knees and bow their hearts to the Creator.

Enter Jesus – listen to His words in **John 16** for those who’ve trusted in Him – *In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.*

W/ this in mind, we must understand that Smyrna isn’t some outlier but a church from whom we must learn. It’s a situation millions of believers are facing today – and could soon knock on the door of our church.

*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 poverty, yet you are rich! I know about 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 life as your victor's crown. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death. Revelation 2:8-11*

I believe there are (2) great lessons/encouragements God offers to the church at Smyrna and to any church who seeks to thrive for the cause of Christ. The 1<sup>st</sup> principle is a warning while the 2<sup>nd</sup> principle is a wonder reminder and encouragement to fight the good fight – knowing that our labor will not be in vain.

I Be **READY** for all Challenges

Like the church at Smyrna, we too will face the same (3) challenges today that they faced in their time.

*I know your afflictions/poverty, yet you are rich! I know about 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.*

A **PRESSURE** to Conform

**afflictions** – translated *tribulation* means *pressure* – and refers to the lengths culture will go to force you to comply w/ their morals/values/beliefs.

Paul spoke of this in **Romans 12** – *Do not be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind that you may prove that good, holy, and acceptable will of God.*

**conformed** – stuffed into the mold

This is what the fallen world desires to do w/ believers – it wants us to stand w/ them rather than w/ Christ.

So, whether by threat of pain or the pressure of PC or our peers – it should come as no surprise that the world seeks to pull us into darkness to snuff out the Light.

So, Jesus calls us to **be alert** to such shenanigans – urging us to be on our guard to the schemes of the world trying to stuff us into their mold/image.

B **POVERTY** to Relent

There were (2) words in the Greek for **poverty**. One meant – *to not have all of the necessities you need*. The 2<sup>nd</sup> one (used here) **ptocheia** means *to be absolutely destitute* – a beggar in need of a handout.

**Here's what happened** – b/c these believers wouldn't conform to the sinful actions/attitude of the culture, they were cast aside, banned, and shut out – often finding themselves unable to get/retain jobs. The result was they were broke/destitute, possessing nothing.

Predictably, this is what the world system continues to do today to those who believe in Christ and who's lives shine a light in the midst of darkness. Consider what's happening in the political world and in Hollywood for those men/women who voice a faith in Christ – they are getting blackballed and shut out to prevent them from having a voice and to force them to compromise their faith in order to make a living.

In some places in our world today, a similar tactic is occurring to churches. Laws are being enacted w/ the threat of restricting funding or creating fines to force churches into compliance or face financial collapse. But true ministry doesn't require money but creativity.

**Rant** – Real ministry can't be hindered by the absence of money b/c real ministry doesn't require grandiose facilities/programs – it simply requires being real and engaged w/ people. This isn't to say that money can't help or having such amenities is evil. We should always be faithful stewards of whatever resources we've been entrusted – **but when the amenities matter more than the ministry** – we've missed the point.

Sadly, much of what we call ministry today isn't ministry at all, but resources being used to fulfill personal preferences/expectations while we live in a blessed *church* culture. To truly be ministry, it has to be Gospel-intentional and used for the purpose of sharing the message of Jesus, growing people in intimacy w/ God, and sending God's people into the world to repeat the process w/ others. It's not doing things to accommodate our schedules or to help us feel good about our religious mediocrity.

## C **PERSECUTION** to Eliminate

This can be a tough pill to swallow, yet if believers refuse to conform b/c of pressure or submit out of need, then the enemy will ratchet up the threat to inflict pain or to remove them from existence.

This is exactly what the believers in Smyrna faced and what many believers are experiencing today all around the world. From Columbine to China – believer's lives are being extinguished b/c of their faith in Christ.

2019 Stats – Top 50 countries on World Watch List:

- There were over 260 mil. Christians living in places where they experienced high levels of persecution.
- There were 2,983 Christians known to have been killed for their faith – and 1,000's more unknown.
- There were at least 9,488 churches and Christian buildings attacked and destroyed.
- There were at least 3,711 Christians detained w/out trial, arrested, sentenced, and imprisoned.

Yet in spite of this persecution – the church is growing.

*One of the great paradoxes in Christian history is that the church is most pure in times of cultural hostility. When things are easy/good, that's when the church seems to go astray. When Christianity seems identical w/ the culture, and even when the church seems to be enjoying its greatest earthly success, then it is weakest. Conversely, when the church encounters hardship, persecution, and suffering, that is when it seems to be closest to its crucified Lord, and there are fewer hypocrites/nominal believers among its members, and the faith of Christians burns most intensely.* Edwards

The truth, it's easy for us to read stories from 2,000 yrs ago or from around the world and miss the connection to us b/c the idea of persecution (to some degree in the US church) is a foreign concept. So, when we read verses like – 2 Timothy 3:12 – *Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted...* It doesn't always compute.

***Yet persecution around the world has never been greater than it is right now.*** We have brothers/sisters in places like Nigeria, S. Sudan, India, N. Korea, Syria, Somalia, China, and Yemen living each day in peril. You can go to [OpenDoorsUSA.org](http://OpenDoorsUSA.org) to read about what's occurring daily – it's terrifyingly encouraging.

**Every day** – at least (b/w 8-16) Christians are killed for their decision to follow Christ – **Watch this video**

Last year, USA Today had an article by David Curry – ***Global Persecution is Worsening while American Churches Slumber*** – *Christians in America need to wake up. Yet the leadership of the American church, w/ its super-pastors and megachurches, is whistling thru the graveyard. The beast that we've created, which relies on upbeat music and positivity to attract donors to sustain large budgets, leaves little room for pastors to talk about the suffering of global Christians. Like most of the culture, the American church is more concerned about college entrance scandals and Game of Thrones than persecution. Inoculated by entertain-ment and self-absorption,*

*they're completely detached from the experience of the global church. The American church is feeding itself to death while the worldwide church is being murdered.*

Folks, we need to wake up! We need to realize the Gospel is under attack in every corner of our world –Right now, U.S. culture is trying to stuff Christians into the mold; but poverty/pain are on the horizon.

II Be **RELIABLE** to the Cause of Christ

**Remember**, at this time, Christians were seen in the Empire as atheists, b/c they didn't believe in the gods of Rome. Thus, they were seen as traitors committing treason b/c they wouldn't pay homage or acknowledge the emperor was lord. So, Jesus encouraged them to:

- Be **FEARLESS**
- Be **FAITHFUL**

*Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer... Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown.*

**This is to say** – *be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord knowing that your labor is not in vain...* Be faithful to the Lord

**God is saying to us** – no matter what you might encounter against you, do not fear and do not fail to be faithful b/c I will be w/ you; I will grow you thru it, and I will glorify Myself in/thru you.

**Jesus said** – *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.* Matthew 5:10–12

*How did Jesus expect His disciples to react under persecution? He said, "Rejoice and be glad!" Thus, we're not to retaliate like an unbeliever, nor sulk like a child, nor lick our wound in self-pity like a dog – nor are we to just grin a bear it like a Stoic. Still less, pretend we enjoy it like a masochist. We're to rejoice as a Christian should and even leap for joy.* John Stott

Consider Daniel in the lion's den. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace – or how about the Bishop of the church at Smyrna – St. Polycarp.

When I was in college, I wrote my senior thesis on St. Polycarp. Polycarp was a disciple of John who became the primary church leader at Smyrna. According to the 1<sup>st</sup> century historian – Eusebius, Polycarp was brought before the Proconsul who warned him to deny Christ or die. Polycarp said, "86 yrs I have served Christ, and never one did He wrong me. How then shall I ever blaspheme my King/Savior?" The Proconsul said, "If you will not confess Caesar as Lord, I will burn you in the fire." Polycarp replied, "You threaten me w/ fire which burns for an hour and after a little while is extinguished, but you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgement and of the eternal punishment reserved for the ungodly." So, Polycarp was bound at the stake – and as the fires began to consume him, he said, "Father, I bless you, for judging me worthy of this hour, that in the company of the martyrs I may share the cup of Christ." Eusebius said as the fire consumed him, Polycarp looked like *gold being refined by fire*. When I consider such triumph in the midst of such pain, I'm reminded of a quote: *Faith that fizzles before the finish was faulty from the first – but faith that flourishes in the fire will be found faithful in the end.*

So much more could be said of this stellar church in the face of such difficulty and to being found faithful to the God who's been more than faithful to us. Personally, it makes me think of the great hymn we sing that reads –

Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father  
There is no shadow of turning with Thee,  
Thou changest not, Thy compassions they fail not  
As Thou hast been, Thou forever will be

Pardon for sin, and a peace that endureth  
Thine own dear presence to cheer, and to guide  
Strength for today, and bright hope for tomorrow  
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside

*Great is Thy faithfulness, Great is Thy faithfulness  
Morning by morning new mercies I see  
And all I have needed Thy hand hath provided  
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord unto me*

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