

7 Churches
The Persecuted Church
Revelation 2:8-11

January 15, 2017

HDBC

The Bible often points out that persecution generally leads to purity and strength when it comes to believers and churches. Consider the words of James..

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have {its} perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. James 1:2-4

The church at Smyrna gave evidence of that. It was one of the churches that received an original copy of the written account of the revelation seen by John on the island of Patmos. And, as with the other six churches it received a personal message from the Lord Jesus in that written account.

We have that message in Revelation 2:8-11. The book of Revelation recounts the fascinating vision brought to the apostle John from the Lord Himself. In the vision, we are able to see with great assurance the ultimate victory that will come. All that seems to wrong with God's good creation will be made right. All the heartache, pain and suffering will be brought to an end. The enemies of God will be vanquished forever and paradise will be restored. It's a great book of the Bible!

In chapters 2-3 we have the content of the personal messages to 7 churches in around Ephesus. Real churches with real challenges. But they are pictures of churches in all the generations which would follow them. These messages are in the Bible to for churches like ours. As we read these messages we are to see what adjustments we are to make as individual believers and as a church. The message to Smyrna is a message to HDBC.

1. Description of Christ (8)

Christ is presented as the author of each letter and is described in a unique way to each church. Each description is relative to the situation that church was facing. Two characteristics of Christ are highlighted for the church at Smyrna.

A. Deity over Creation

The first and the last is a clear reference to the deity of Christ. He existed before anything else and will never cease to exist. He is the beginning and the end. This was a statement that He is above all others and is in fact God.

B. Power over Death

As in 1:17-18 the phrase "*the first and the last*" is linked to the resurrection. Because he is the divine one, he can and has conquered the greatest enemy of humanity, death. He died that he might conquer death through resurrection.

The eternal God became man, died and was also resurrected. Great mystery. How can the ever-living one enter time and space, then die. Peter gives us the answer. *He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.*

2. Condition of the Church (9)

Nothing is really known about the founding of his church. It is not mentioned by name in the book of Acts. However we know from Acts that Paul did extensive work in the region. Likely planted by Paul when he was working in and around Ephesus.

I Know - Experiential knowledge. What did He know about them?

A. Tribulation

Refers to great pressure. Pictures a heavy boulder on one's body, usually leading to death. Also pictures the grinding stones which crush the wheat in order to turn it into flour. Word speaks of serious trouble.

B. Poverty

There are 2 Greek words that could be translated *poverty*. One means having just enough to get by. The other means being totally destitute, having nothing. The second word is used here. No welfare system in that day. Many people starved to death. Added pressure for those with kids.

C. Rich

They were wealthy because of their relationship to Jesus. Through their suffering they were laying up treasures in Heaven. Things are not always what they seem.

D. Blasphemy of Others

There was a large Jewish population there who were antagonistic toward the believers. **They claimed to be the real people of God**, but their actions proved that they were not. Those Jews who hated and rejected Jesus Christ were just as much Satan's followers as pagan idol worshippers.

They accused believers of all kinds of things.

Political disloyalty

Cannibalism (based on their misunderstanding of the Lord's Supper),

Incest (calling one another brother and sister)

Wishing to destroy the church, some influential Jews in Smyrna reported these apparent crimes to Rome. The fact that they are called the *synagogue of Satan* which indicates that they actually met together to plot against the believers.

3. Challenge to the Church (10)

A. Be Fearless

Jesus indicated that they were going to experience even more persecution. Some would be imprisoned and others would lose their lives. But the challenge is to be fearless in the face of it. Note two encouraging things to help them.

1) The Suffering is Limited in Reach

Satan is about to throw some of you into prison. Not all of you. There is a limitation to his reach in terms of the number arrested. Limited by God's sovereign allowance.

Satan can afflict the body, but not the soul. He may cause you to go to prison and suffer physical pain, but He cannot touch your soul. That is why He mentions the crown of life awaiting the faithful.

2) The Suffering is Limited in Duration

Ten Days. Reminds us of the trial period for Daniel and friends when they were in Babylon. Not sure if this is a reference to a literal 10 days or not. Regardless, it is a limited amount of time. Suffering, for the believer, is **never** forever. It is always limited in duration.

B. Be Faithful

Some would be taken to their death, but were counseled to remain true. Even the threat of death should not cause a believer to forsake his commitment to Christ.

It was in Smyrna that Polycarp, an apostle of John was martyred. Burned at the stake in A.D. 155.

Had been asked to say **Caesar is Lord**. He refused and was brought to the stadium where the proconsul urged him saying, **Swear, and I will set you at liberty, reproach Christ.**

Polycarp answered, **Eighty and six years have I served my Lord, and He never did me any injury. How then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?**

When the proconsul continued to press him he answered, *Since you are vainly urgent that I should swear by the fortune of Caesar, and you pretend not to know who and what I am, hear me declare with boldness, I am a Christian.*

Threatened with **wild beasts**. Polycarp replied *call them then*.

Threatened with **fire**, Polycarp said,

You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour, and after a little is extinguished, but are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. But why do you tarry? Bring forth what you will.

They bound him with ropes. He cried out

O Lord God Almighty, I give You thanks that you have counted me, worthy of this day and this hour, that I should have a part in the number of your martyrs, in the cup of your Christ, to the resurrection of eternal life, both of soul and body. May I be accepted this day before You as an acceptable sacrifice.

When he finished his prayer they lit the fire. He became a faithful martyr.

To the faithful . . . the crown of life

Two words: *Diadema* (Royalty), **Stephanos** (Victory). Especially significant for the believers in Smyrna which was also famous for its games.

Faithfulness is evidence of true belief. The crown of life refers to the eternal life when is possessed by every believer. The important thing is the see the contrast. The devil will take your life, but when He does you have a “crown of life” for you. The devil does not have the keys of life and death, Jesus does.

4. Counsel to All Believers (11a)

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Once more we see the universal application of this letter not only to all churches, but to all believers. Pause and hear the counsel of Christ. *If you are hearing (reading) these words, pay attention. Do not dismiss what the Spirit is saying.*

There are some of us here who will one day face persecution, tribulation, spiritual attack. We are counseled by Christ Himself to pay close attention to this letter.

5. **Promise of Deliverance (11b)**

The one who overcomes is the one who has placed saving faith in Christ.

Second Death is reference to eternal condemnation in the lake of fire. Jesus makes it clear that in spite of the suffering in this life you are promised to be delivered from the ultimate source of eternal suffering.

Takeaways . . .

1. Jesus is bigger than death

First and last. One who died and was resurrected. As we think about our own death or the death of people we love, remember that Jesus has been there and defeated it. He is bigger than death.

2. Jesus knows when his people suffer

Believers never suffer alone. He always knows and always cares.

3. Jesus calls us to be faithful even to death

Our faithfulness is not dependent on our situation or on the threats that come to us. True faithfulness cannot be conditional. We are called to be unconditionally faithful. Why? Because that is what He has been and is.

4. Jesus promises an incredible future beyond this life

Regardless of what happens in this life, we have an incredible future to look forward to.