

## Letters to the Churches 2-18-01 Smyrna

This is the second of the letters to the seven churches. Last week we were reminded that everything must flow from our first love – if we leave that place of relationship the church will not last. We can be doing good things, things God would have us do, but if we have left that first love behind – If Jesus no longer is our chief desire, the days of the fellowship are numbered.

Smyrna is the next church addressed by the glorified Christ. Smyrna was a beautiful city that sits on the inlet of a sea. It was founded as a Greek colony around 1000 BC. But in 600BC it was destroyed. When it was rebuilt it was carefully planned like many modern cities. Its streets were wide and the stone pavers of excellent quality. Some poets claimed it was the most beautiful city of Ionia. It made a great harbor and was located in the perfect spot to be a city of trade. Its coinage had a ship as the emblem. It was fiercely loyal to Rome. The stadium and games held there were famous throughout Asia.

In this beautiful wealthy city were a group of faithful Christians. The Smyrna church is one of two churches in which no faults are addressed. My first idea is that this must be one of the more pleasant letters to read. But when we conclude I think you will agree that it is one of the most painful to read.

Rev 2:8 (NIV)<sup>8</sup> "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.

If you recall I have the impression that the description of Christ in the introduction to each letter has something to do with the call of the church. We are an expression of the life of Christ amongst us to our community, and each church has a unique call expressing something unique of the life of Christ. The First and the Last, who died and came to life. What is their calling? I think it is to display the preeminence of Christ, the first place He deserves and has in the life of the saints in Smyrna. The saints in Smyrna do not live for comfort, or acceptance, or position, they live of the One who died for them.

The First and the Last is a title that humbles every title of man and puts it in perspective. Who or what can compare? It is the title of God in Is 44:6. All things begin and end in Him. That puts all our vain titles in their place. The people of Smyrna liked to call their city first in Asia. What is that to the One who is first of all things and the last of all things. To the Christian, to know that the risen Jesus is there with them in the beginning of trouble and to the end of this life is a great assurance the world does not understand.

"Who died and came to life" The Conqueror of the great enemy of man, death, has been victorious over all. The believers of Smyrna clung to these truths, of who Christ is and his resurrection power, to face the difficult times in which they lived. No matter what man would do to them, Christ had been through it and would understand their circumstances. Not only had He been through the worst man could dish out, but He lived triumphantly while enduring it and could help them to do the same.

Mariko and I watched the Real Bridge on the River Kwai documentary. Man's inhumanity to man can go to extremes that are hard to comprehend. The survivors told that those who made it had one thing in common, they had a partner – a mate – many were Australians and used that term. You needed someone to look after you when you were sick, keep the guards from beating on you when you were tired, to cover for you, to keep you company, to give you hope. The church at Smyrna had a mate that was always there for them no matter what they went through – always at their side – and so do we if we will turn to Him.

Rev 2:9 (NIV)<sup>9</sup> 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.

Your KJV uses a manuscript that includes "works" (I know your works) or as we saw in Ephesus in the NIV translation "deeds". Two of the oldest manuscripts do not contain the word here and so it is left out in some of the modern translations. I know your afflictions and your poverty – yet you are rich! Let us look at afflictions first. This dear fellowship in Smyrna suffered physically for the cause of Christ. There was quite a large Jewish community here and they were strongly opposed to the Christians. Often false accusations were brought against them. From history and Scripture we find the most common accusations were entirely baseless. One was cannibalism. Because of the wording of communion celebration of eating the body and drinking the blood of Christ they accused them of eating people that had disappeared from the community. Their common meal was called Agape and so they were accused of sexual orgies. Another was that they were arsons. Preaching that the world would end in fire, when unexplained fires broke out Christians were often accused. They were called family wreckers because their faith often separated them from their family. They were accused of being unpatriotic because they would not declare Caesar as Lord. Finally and strangely enough they were accused of being atheists because they had no image which they worshipped.

Any of these accusations might bring them before the magistrates and have them physically punished. The word affliction comes from the Greek word *thlipsis* which means to crush under a weight. The town they lived in, Smyrna, means myrrh. Crushed under a weight its sweet fragrance comes out. Myrrh was used in burials to cover the smell of decay. These Christians were dead to self and through the crushing afflictions gave forth the aroma of Christ, who in the Song of Songs hands drip with myrrh and a bundle of myrrh is in his bosom.

Is their affliction in your life? It is to bring forth the fragrance of Christ. The crushing is there to release the perfume that otherwise would be locked within.

There is much we could say of the value of affliction in the life of a believer. We avoid the meditation of it but it is frequently mentioned in Scripture. Affliction helped them to live their calling of presenting Christ as First in their lives and affections.

I know your *ptocheia* poverty. This Greek word is not just doing without some things – it is having nothing. When falsely accused they could also be fined. Like the church in Hebrews the world took advantage of the meekness and heavenly minded attitude of Christians. Heb 10:34 (KJV)<sup>34</sup> For ye had compassion of me in my bonds, and took joyfully the spoiling of your goods, knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance.

In Smyrna this went to such an extent that they literally had no material possessions to take. Is that depressing to you? Or does it make you hungry for a greater commitment in your own life? Jesus tells them, "I know what it is you are enduring for my name sake. I know what you are going through because you love me. You are rich with real wealth, things that truly last, with heavenly rewards." Would Christ say you are truly rich?

And much of this poverty and affliction came from, "the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan." The Apostle Paul clearly taught that a Jew is one whose heart is circumcised, not just of the lineage of Abraham. These who called themselves Jews did not have circumcised hearts, hearts sensitive to the Messiah that had come to save them. They said they were Jews but in fact were not.

In the New Testament the overwhelming use of the word synagogue is Jewish. The Christians did originally gather in the synagogues but as the animosity of the Jews grew against the Christians who claimed they had killed the Messiah, the believers more and more gathered separately in what they called the church, or the assembly, or congregation (all of which mean the same thing). The synagogue was the center of opposition against those whose hearts were circumcised, of both Jewish and Gentile ethnicity. Those who oppose the people of God and accuse them are of their Father, the Accuser of the brothers. And so they are called the Synagogue of Satan.

In our world today the Synagogue of Satan is growing as the liberal left gears up its rhetoric accusing believers of being intolerant, narrow minded, ignorant, and working to make opposition of sin a crime. They hope to return to the days of Smyrna where we can be beaten and robbed in the name of justice, but really it is because we are a thorn of truth in their sides.

<sup>10</sup> 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.

Matt 10:28-33 (NIV)<sup>28</sup> Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.<sup>29</sup> Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father.<sup>30</sup> And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.<sup>31</sup> So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.<sup>32</sup> "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven.<sup>33</sup> But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.

Jesus tells them what He said plainly during his earthly ministry. We so easily fear what can happen to our bodies that are here for so short a time. What we should fear is facing the wrath of God for rejection of his salvation in favor of a life of comfort. These believers had made the choice to suffer for the cause of Christ. The Lord was encouraging them to not begin fearing man but to keep their eyes on eternity.

A disciple of John named Polycarp was a teacher in this fellowship. At the ripe old age of 86 he had a dream of his pillow on fire and told the fellowship he would soon die a martyr. Shortly after he was arrested. Standing in the coliseum he was given a chance

to declare Caesar as his Lord. This saint answered: "Eighty and six years have I served him, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" The proconsul threatened him with burning, and Polycarp replied: "You threaten me with the fire that burns for a time, and is quickly quenched, for you do not know the fire which awaits the wicked in the judgment to come and in everlasting punishment. Why are you waiting? Come, do what you will."

They brought him to the stake to burn him alive before the crowd. There was a problem with finding enough dry wood, but the Jewish community quickly responded with arm loads, one man even flinging the wood in Polycarp's face. The wood was lit, but witnesses say it formed an arch around him and did not touch his body. Then a guard wishing this aged saint not to suffer stabbed Polycarp in the heart and his blood doused the flames. "Don't be afraid for what you are about to suffer." He was faithful unto death and surely did receive a crown of life. The games at Smyrna were won by hard training and the reward was little laurel that would soon fade and fall apart. The Christians of Smyrna were receiving a crown that would never fade, an eternal crown, one of life eternal.

Ten days was often used to express a period of short duration. It means it will not go on forever. The saints of Smyrna took hope that there was an end in sight to this abuse. But we must understand that imprisonment was usually to preclude execution. History says that is exactly what happened there as short bursts of excitement against Christians would produce a few martyrs and then tensions would die down for a time, until another short period of antagonism would flare up. They never knew when their conditions would change.

<sup>11</sup> 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.

It is appointed to man once to die. We will all face it in time. But it is the second death that is the real suffering. Those without the crown of life must face the fact that all they lived for was a lie and now they will be judged for rejecting the One who gave his life for them. The second death will not touch you who are faithful unto death. The crown of life is yours, bought and paid for by your Savior who keeps you and finishes the work He started in you. You may wonder how you could ever be faithful in a life like they had. It is just as difficult in our lives of wealth to stay faithful and not let the world steal our hearts. It is only his grace that helps you hear, grows you daily, and will complete what He started.

Don't waste a minute of His work in your life. If there are things you know your heart has found attractive, that lure you from your first love, that tempt you from keeping Jesus at the first place He deserves in your life, by his grace walk away from that now and by his grace never return to that lure. Hear what the Spirit says to the churches, to this church, and don't be hurt at all by the second death.