

Suffering Smyrna

Revelation 2:8-11

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Introduction: If Ephesus could be called a "loveless" church, Smyrna could be called a "suffering" church. The ancient city of Smyrna was located 35 miles north of Ephesus. It was a busy port & manufacturing center, located on the Hermos River. Its name came from the trade in the herb myrrh (used as an anesthetic, an embalming substance, & a perfume). The old city was destroyed in 600 B.C. by the Lydians but later rebuilt by Alexander the Great (around 300 B.C.). The most famous landmark of the city was Mount Pagos, having temples dedicated to Cybelle, Apollo, Asklepios, Aphrodite, & Zeus. Smyrna was not only a beautiful city, but it was also a political center. The town leaders always had the political foresight to support the "winning" side in wars fought across Asia Minor. An alliance was gained with Rome, even before the formation of the Roman Empire. In 195 B.C., the first temple in Asia dedicated to Emperor worship was constructed. Later, in A.D. 26, the city was chosen to build a temple in honor of Tiberius. For these & other reasons, the city was allowed its own government, exemption from most taxation, & became a center of the Roman judicial system. Note in the message to this church its Command, Commendation, Counsel, & Challenge. Consider the words of Christ to the suffering believers in Smyrna, "Be fearless & be faithful."

I. The **Command** (:8)

- A. He Who is the "*first*" & the "*last*" [His relation to time & to eternity].
 - 1. He is the beginning & the ending (cf. 1:8 & 1:17).
 - 2. He is the Eternal One.
 - 3. He is the Resurrected One.
- B. He Who "*was dead, & is alive*"
 - 1. Literally, He Who became dead (on the cross) & Who lives (is living).
 - 2. True of the city itself - once destroyed (600B.C.) & then later rebuilt (300 B.C.).
 - 3. True of the martyred saints - physical death but resurrection to new life.

II. The **Commendation** (:9)

- A. "*I know thy works*" - He knows ours as well (cf. Psalm 139).
- B. "*I know thy tribulation*" (word meaning "pressure").
 - 1. From the Jews - those opposed to the Gospel (cf. I Thessalonians 2:14-16).
 - a. Their blasphemy (slander) - denying the Person of Jesus Christ.
 - b. Their claim - say they are Jews - they were by race but not 'true' Jews (spiritual Israel) - see Romans 9:6-8 & 2:28.
 - c. Their synagogue - an assembly belonging to & controlled by Satan.
 - 2. From the Gentiles - pagan officials & citizens.
 - a. The **expectation** of Emperor worship - as a sign of patriotism & loyalty:
Once a year, each citizen was expected to burn incense on the altar of the Emperor's temple & repeat "Caesar is Lord"; then they were given a certificate allowing "freedom" of worship the rest of the year.

For conclusion:

- [b. The **example** of Polycarp: Bishop of Smyrna, arrested & told to deny Christ & worship Caesar or be put to death. He replied, "Eighty & six years have I served Him, & He never did me wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King & Savior?"
- c. The **eagerness** of the Jews & Gentiles to kill Polycarp: Though it was on a Sabbath, the Jews violated their own laws by carrying wood into the stadium where Polycarp was burned at the stake.]

- C. *"I know thy poverty"* (word meaning extreme poverty, having nothing at all).
1. Their opposition - by both Jews & Gentiles, businesses boycotted, not allowed to hold jobs, often robbed or possessions confiscated (cf. Hebrews 10:34).
 2. The application - even this was allowed by God's sovereignty (I Peter 4:12-13 & 19).
 - a. Too much prosperity & pleasure is bad for us (see Laodicea, Rev. 3), causes one to be self-sufficient & forget God.
 - b. Persecution & suffering remind us of dependency upon God & of His comfort; the persecution of the saints is a persecution of Christ (cf. Heb. 2:14 & Acts 9:5).
 - c. *"Thou art rich"* - spiritual riches - "No man is any richer than his soul" III Jn. :2.

III. The **Counsel** (Consolation) (:10) [Note, there is no condemnation!]

A. Be fearless – "Stop being afraid."

Why do Christians suffer?

1. It is corrective - disciplinary, as a father chastens his child (Heb. 12:5-11).
2. It is preventative - consider Paul's thorn in the flesh (II Cor. 12:7).
3. It is instructive - teaching that which only suffering can teach (Rom. 5:3-5; Heb. 5:8; James 1:3-5).
4. It is productive - through which a better testimony for Christ is given (Acts 9:16 & Col. 1:24).

B. Be faithful ("become faithful even unto death").

1. Even though cast into prison - a step on the way to trial or execution.
2. Even though tribulation 10 days:
 - a. A time of testing (cf. Dan. 1:11-15; Jer. 42:7). [Ten Emperors, 10 yrs. Diocletian?]
 - b. A short time, limited by God's mercy & soon to be past (Gen. 24:55).
3. Expect a crown of life - cf. James 1:12:
 - a. A stephanos - laurel of leaves, given winners of athletic contests, worn at weddings or other celebrations, or given to town officials for faithful service.
 - b. Not a diadema - crown of royalty worn by kings & emperors & Christ (19:12).
 - c. A crown of life in contrast to the trial of martyrdom.

Why are Christians not to fear & challenged to be faithful?

1. Sovereignty > all is in God's sovereignty - His will is holy, just & good.
2. Security > they are in His hands: speaks of Possession, Protection, & Purpose.
3. Sufficiency > they have spiritual riches (2:9) & eternal life (II Cor. 5:6-8).

IV. The **Challenge** (:11)

A. To hear out - *"He that hath an ear, let him hear..."*

1. The principle - only those who desire to do God's will can know God's will.
2. The promise - Christ, through the Spirit is speaking to all churches.

B. To hold on - *"He that overcometh..."*

1. The overcomer is a true Christian, a believer (I John 5:4-5).
2. The overcomer has victory over the second death (cf. Rev. 20:11-15 & Mt. 10:28).
"If men & women today would fear the second death as much as they seek to postpone the first, there would be a great turning to God in our land" (Neal).

Conclusion: The church in Smyrna continued to survive under such hardship & persecution. They found strength by looking unto Jesus & depending upon Him. The city of Smyrna exists today, known by the name Izmir, the third largest city in Turkey. There continues to be a group of professing Christians in the city. Could we be a church like Smyrna? Would we be fearless in face of persecution (Polycarp)? Would we be faithful, willing to suffer for Christ even unto death? Are you suffering pressure, persecution, or poverty? Look to Jesus! Be fearless! Be faithful! Are you one of the overcomers? *"This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith"* (I Jn. 5:4).