

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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SMYRNA: THE SUFFERING CHURCH FULLY APPROVED

You would think, what with the vast amount of Scripture on the subject, that Christians would understand that suffering and afflictions are to be expected in the Christian life (**Note** Romans 5:3-5; James 1:1-12; 1 Peter 4:7-19; Acts 14:22; 1 Thessalonians 3:3). Such is not the case, at least as Christianity is popularly presented. Repeatedly we are told that victory is the key word in the Christian's vocabulary; the solution to every problem is simple: claim the victory! This is interpreted to mean that the believer is to be constantly expecting, in response to his or her faith, to be delivered from suffering, whether it be physical, mental, financial -- it doesn't matter what it is -- it's always onward and upward. "Those who have imbibed the philosophy that Christianity consists entirely of felt experiences of joy, power, miracles and sensations have become by this error extremely vulnerable and ill-equipped to stand in the days of tribulation."¹ How people who advocate the "always victorious deliverance" type of Christianity can cope with the case of the suffering Church at Smyrna is beyond me. Here is Smyrna, suffering, and what is our Lord's response?

- I. ***HISTORICAL BACKGROUND.*** The history of Smyrna furnishes us with a great deal of insight, not only into the city itself, but, as such, into the interpretation of this letter. The language used by the Lord of Glory would have special meaning to the suffering Church.
 - A. ***The Founding of the Church.*** Unlike Ephesus, we have no mention in the book of Acts, or elsewhere in the New Testament for that matter, of the origin of the Church in Smyrna. We might imply from texts like Romans 15:19 and Acts 19:10 that the Apostle Paul had something to do with the Gospel reaching the city and the establishing of a church, even early Church tradition attributes the church there to the efforts of the Apostle Paul.² Two things would support this contention: (1) Smyrna was centrally located on the major trade routes. It was a great commercial city with a constant flow of traffic; and (2) it had a large Jewish population and would thus have come in early contact with the Gospel. Because the Scriptures give us no further light on the subject, we have to say in the final analysis that we really do not know how and by whose ministry the church was planted.
 - B. ***The City of Smyrna.*** As I stated earlier, Smyrna was one of the great commercial cities of the ancient world. As such, it was a wealthy community. The city took great pride in itself, and she had a number of reasons, humanly speaking, for doing so. It was indeed a beautiful city with two ports, one of which reached into the heart of the city. Directly behind the city stood Mount Pagos, situated much like, and often identified with, a crown. Thus a familiar phrase was "Pagos the crown of Smyrna." The city likewise viewed itself as a city faithful to Rome. It had in fact supported Rome before the Romans achieved their world-wide empire.³ Because of its faithfulness to Rome, it was granted the distinct privilege of having the Temple of Tiberius built there. The city also lay claim to the Greek poet Homer, declaring Smyrna the birthplace of the poet, and a great temple was erected in his honor. Thus the city was recognized as the seat of worship for the deified Homer. But there were other gods, one of which was the goddess Sipylos, better known as the twin deity Nemesis. All in all, the city, like the rest of antiquity, was pagan to the core in the worship of many gods.

II. CHRIST'S DESCRIPTION. "These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again,"⁴ comp. 1:17. The major thought is Christ's eternity. "He is not only the eternal One in relation to time but the resurrected One in relation to life."⁵ He is as Hebrews declares, "the same yesterday and today and forever" (13:8). Not only is He eternal, but He is victorious. He has conquered death. Again note the declaration of the epistle to the Hebrews, "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death -- that is, the devil -- and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death" (2:14,15). The relationship of Christ's description to the Church at Smyrna is of great importance, "Being addressed, as this Epistle is, to a church exposed, and hereafter to be still more exposed, to the fiercest blasts of persecution, it is graciously ordered that all the attributes which Christ here claims for Himself should be such as would encourage and support his servants in their trials and distress."⁶

III. CHRIST'S COMMENDATION AND CITATION. The Lord of the churches knows His churches. "The Master's method in commending this church at Smyrna is remarkable. He offers them no solution of the problem of their pain, and it may be said that the commendation is contained in a silence and a parenthesis. His approval of this church is manifest not so much by what He said, as by the fact that He had complaint to make concerning them."⁷ In the midst of their sufferings, the Lord declares, "I know your afflictions" (the word translated "afflictions" is *thlipsin*; it refers to strong pressure. The root meaning is crush, squash, squeeze as in a miller crushing wheat into flour (comp. Acts 14:22; 1 Thessalonians 3:3; 1 Peter 2:21). How were these Christians afflicted?⁸

A. **Poverty.** That the church in Smyrna, a city of great wealth and prosperity, should be described as poor (the word is *ptōcheian*, which means abject poverty, to the point of being beggars) demands attention.⁹ The reason for their poverty was their Christianity; they were afflicted in the same way the Hebrew Christians were in Hebrews 10:13. Not only by pillage, but simply because they did not conform to accepted practice (attending the various temples, etc.), they suffered loss. "Make no mistake: it does not always pay to be a Christian. Nor is honesty by any means always the best policy, if material gain is your ambition. Poverty has often been part of the cost of Christian discipleship."¹⁰

B. **Slander.** The word is *blasphēmian*, to revile, slanderous accusation. The word is used here in reference to men, not God. The Christians had to endure wicked and cruel gossip and libel. The source of the slander was mainly from the Jews of the city. The chief reason for their evil speaking was probably akin to the long history of Jewish opposition that the Apostle Paul encountered (cf. Acts 21:27, 28). It was not that the Jews were concerned about pagan Gentiles becoming Christians, but when Jews became Christians, that was the whole issue. The church was following in the footsteps of her Lord (1 Peter 2:23).

NOTE: The expression, "those who say they are Jews and are not," has been the subject of much debate. Many commentators point to this and Romans 2:28, 29 and Philippians 3:3, arguing for the church being "spiritual Israel." Dispensationalists on the other hand contend that Israel is Israel and the church is the church and the twain shall never meet. Charles Baker, for instance, argues that *all* references such as Romans 2:28, 29 are referring to converted Jews.¹¹ But the point of Revelation 2:9 is that the "Jews" are not really "Jews" -- who then are the real "Jews"?¹² The passage does not tell us, it does declare that Jews who have rejected their Messiah, the Lord Jesus, are not really Jews, but a "synagogue of Satan."

- C. **Prison.** The real source of the church's affliction and slander was *the* slanderer, the accuser of the brethren, Satan, or the Devil. "The devil will put some of you in prison," that is, he will be the guiding force behind the human agents responsible for the imprisonment of some of the faithful. Prison in the early Roman world was, in fact, a mere waiting room for execution.¹³ The point was understood by the church -- some of them would be martyred -- and thus they are encouraged to "be faithful even to the point of death."

IV. CHRIST'S COMFORT AND ENCOURAGEMENT. As already mentioned, this letter contains neither rebuke nor warning. He declares that they "are rich!" Despite outward appearances and the announcement that things are going to get worse -- what great comfort the words of Christ to this suffering church -- "You are rich!" D. L. Moody once related the well-known anecdote, "How much did he leave?" said a man when the death of a wealthy friend was mentioned. "*He left it all!*"¹³ Better to have the approval of Christ and the poverty than all the riches in the world with the likes of Revelation 3:17 attached. Embedded in this short letter are five distinct sources of comfort and encouragement given by the Lord Jesus to the suffering saints in Smyrna.

- A. Their persecutions would be under the sympathizing control of their once suffering Lord, who was "the first and the last," and who had himself also died, but conquered death and rose again;
- B. They would not be universal over them all; probably they would not extend to very many victims, for the warning is, "The devil will cast some of you into prison" -- only some of them;
- C. Their tribulations would be for only a limited period, for, though the expression "ten days" has the symbolic meaning of totality, it has also the subordinate application of brevity in time;
- D. Their tribulations would be overruled to the production of benefits; that is, the persecutions would be allowed in order that the faithful might be tried;
- E. They would be followed by a most glorious reward, for the exhortation and promise are given: "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life." When all these were received and properly considered as coming from the lips of the God of truth, they must almost have taken away the dread of the ominous future.¹⁴

NOTE: There are five crowns mentioned in the New Testament: (1) a crown of righteousness, for the good fight of faith (2 Timothy 4:8); (2) a crown of rejoicing, for ministry in perfecting the saints (1 Thessalonians 2:19); (3) a crown of glory, for elders who are faithful under-shepherds (1 Peter 5:4); (4) a crown of reward for those who run the race (1 Corinthians 9:25); (5) a crown of life,¹⁵ for endurance in suffering (James 1:12 and here in Revelation 2:10). It refers in this context to the struggle that those who suffer must endure and the promise of this particular crown. In the Old Testament, the crown denoted honor and dignity (cf. Psalms 8:5; 103:4). Ramsey demonstrates the Greek notion very clearly when he says, "The crown or garland was usually a circlet of flowers; and the mention of a crown immediately aroused in the ancient mind the thought of a flower. Crowns were worn chiefly in the worship of the gods. The worshipper was expected to have on his head a garland of the flowers or foliage sacred to the god whose rites he was performing. . . . Thus the ideas of the flower and of the crown suggest in their turn the idea of the god with whose worship they were connected."¹⁶ To the minds of the Christians at Smyrna this would mean divine approval, a symbol of victory, a declaration of the validity of their identification with Jesus Christ, for He will crown them. It is a *gift*, not a merit award.

CONCLUSION: There is no promise to the church at Smyrna that they would escape suffering, rather they are to expect their suffering to continue. The Lord Jesus declares that He knows all there is to be known, past, present and future -- "Fear not," be faithful, look to Me, depend on Me, and in essence He tells them to "follow Me" in suffering. To the Christians at Smyrna, "It has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to

believe on him, but also to suffer for him” (Philippians 1:29). They were, no doubt, like the rest of us, wondering why -- why is this happening? Why does the Lord not deliver us? Christ does not address Himself directly to these kinds of questions. “He tells them that He, having been dead, is now alive; and, moreover, that He holds the keys of death and of Hades, the symbols of solution and authority. He has unlocked the problem and is now Master of the situation.”¹⁷ He knows, He cares, He will always abide with His own (Hebrews 13:5, 6), especially to those granted the honor and privilege to suffer for His name’s sake. The church at Smyrna is called to suffer, to be faithful and not to be fearful. “The way not to fear is to replace your fear with a greater fear. One fear must displace another. The way not to fear man is to fear God. Reverence to God overpowers our fear of men. We must hold God in highest respect and awe. Fear God and you won’t fear men. Fearing God begins with a high view of God. Cultivate an understanding of His awesome holiness. Bow before His absolute sovereignty. Kneel before His blazing righteousness. Being consumed with the grandeur of God causes us to fear Him.”¹⁸

ENDNOTES

¹ Erroll Hulse, *The Believer's Experience* (Zondervan, 1978), p. 144.

² According to Polycarp (martyred A.D. 156 in Smyrna), Paul visited the city on his way to Ephesus (Acts 19:1), cf. H.B. Swete, *Commentary on Revelation* (rpt. Kregel, 1977), p. 30.

³ “As early as 195 B.C., when Antiochus was still at the height of his power, Smyrna built a temple and instituted a worship of Rome; this bold step was the pledge of uncompromising adherence to the cause of Rome, while its fortune was still uncertain,” W. M. Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches* (rpt. James Family, 1978), p. 254.

⁴ The NIV and early Revised versions have “again.” “The insertion of this word *again* is unjustified and unjustifiable: There is nothing in the Greek corresponding to it. . . . The analogy of Rev. 13:2ff corroborates the plain sense of this letter. The idea is not that life begins a second time after a period of death, but that life persists in and through death. . . . If anything should be inserted in the translation to make the meaning quite clear, the word needed is *yet* – *which was dead and yet lives*,” W. M. Ramsay, p. 269.

⁵ J. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Moody, 1967), p. 60.

⁶ R. C. Trench, *The Seven Churches* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1978), p. 106.

⁷ G. Campbell-Morgan, *A First Century Message to Twentieth Century Christians* (Revell, 1902), p. 39.

⁸ *Sou tēn thlipsin kai ptōcheian*, the fact that the articles precede “affliction” seems to indicate the “poverty” was a direct result of affliction.

⁹ “Poverty is always hard to be borne, but in their case must have been peculiarly trying because of the contrast with the wealth by which they were surrounded,” T. Murphy, *The Messages to the Seven Churches* (Presbyterian Publication, 1895), p. 215.

¹⁰ J. R. W. Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church* (IVP, 1958), p. 39.

¹¹ “. . . but in each case the apostle is speaking about actual, literal Israelites and not saved Gentiles,” *A Dispensational Theology* (Grace Bible College, Pub. 1971), p. 527. This is not a very good argument, since Paul did not spell out this distinction in Romans or Philippians, and the overall impression is that Gentile Christians could apply this to themselves as well.

¹² Ford Ottman, one of the older dispensational writers, labors hard (and rather fancifully) to try and prove that the word “Jew” must be restricted. It does not, he says, mean “Israel” or “Hebrew.” However, the terms are used interchangeably, cf. Acts 16:20; Romans 2:28, 29; 3:1; 1 Corinthians 9:20. Ottman attempts to explain the term “synagogue of Satan” as a reference to Judaistic Christians! cf. *The Unfolding of the Ages* (Baker and Taylor Co., 1905), pp. 34-40.

¹³ D. L. Moody, *Notes From My Bible* (Revell, 1895), p. 62.

¹⁴ T. Murphy, *The Message to the Seven Churches* (Presbyterian Publications, 1895), p. 225.

¹⁵ “The genitive *tēs zōēs* is . . . probably to be taken not exegetically as *the crown which consists in life*, but as *the crown which belongs to the eternal life*. As the tree of life (cf. 2:7; 22:2, 14) is a symbol of the blessed immortality in Christ, so the crown of life appears to symbolize its full consummation.” R. H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John I* (T & T Clark, 1920), p. 59.

¹⁶ W. M. Ramsay, *The Letter to the Seven Churches* (rpt. James Family, 1978), p. 258.

¹⁷ Campbell-Morgan, *A First Century Message to Twentieth Century Christians* (Revell, 1902), pp. 58-59.

¹⁸ Steven Lawson, *Final Call* (Crossway Books, 1994), p. 106.

