

Smyrna: Faithful in Suffering

Revelation 2:8-11

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It was Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The year is 155 AD. The stadium of Smyrna, Asia is loud with the roar of spectators. The proconsul or city governor stands in his box seat to begin the events. The trumpets sound and the crowd hushes. "Let it begin", rings out. The participants are ushered onto the playing field accompanied by the delighted shouts of the crowds. Bright uniforms flicker around the sidelines. Banners wave. Doves flutter upward in newfound freedom. The crashing of the drums and the blare of trumpets make the din almost unbearable. It is a scene not unfamiliar to us. Yes, let the games begin.

The authorities brought one forward. There on a raised dais is a statue of Caesar. In front is a table on which a golden bowl sits from which incense rises in fragrant plumes of blue smoke. Beside the golden bowl is an urn. It was his last chance to do the right thing, to deny the charge against him.

He is an old man, having seen over 86 years of living and ministering. Having been thrown from the vehicle earlier, he limps on a sprained thigh. In great dignity with grace shining from his face, he stands.

"Simply swear by Caesar", the governor pleads.

"Eighty-six years have I served, and He never did me any injury. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior? I am a Christian," he says. "If you want to know what that is, set a day and listen to me."

"Persuade the people," is the derisive response. "I would explain it to you, not to them," came the mild, but strong reply.

"Then I'll throw you to the beasts."

"I have no fear of the beasts."

"If you scorn the beasts, I will have you burned."

"You try to frighten me with the fire that burns for an hour and forget the fire of hell that never goes out. Why are you waiting? Bring on what you will"

The governor calls to the people, "He says he is a Christian." Then the mob shouts in a frenzy, "This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our gods. Let a lion loose."

"I cannot because the chase of the lions is past."

"Burn him. Burn him alive," rings out from the crowd.

Immediately there is a great movement as a number of the crowd stream out in to the streets. Even on this Sabbath, the Jews are marked as taking their place among this awful crowd., gathering up wood, straw and sticks from the nearby homes and shops. These were piled around the stake erected for that purpose. The aged pastor calmly removed his outer clothes, loosed his girdle and removed his shoes. Refusing to be spiked to the post, he reaches those thin arms around it and is tied by his hands. Bowing his head, he prays.

How is this possible? By what divine help can such men and women give of the last measure of sacrifice?

How can we possibly identify with this? Our laziness keeps us from the Word and prayer and church. Our self-pity requires constant outpours of the therapy of other's attention. Poverty means going without a dishwasher or a new car this year or the latest, greatest hot device. Suffering means the inconveniences of ministry.

How can we possibly cope with this? We can barely deal with the wounds of the past and the pressures of the present. Just the prospect of real suffering sends shivers among those used to imaginary pains.

The gentle steel that faces this suffering is forged in the purifying and sustaining promises held out in the Word.

“To the messenger of the church in Smyrna, write.” The name of the city is taken from the word *myrrh*. It means bitter. Yet the city had been a place of special recognition for its loyalty to Rome and the beauty of its setting. It was known as the crown jewel of Asia. It had been heavily settled by Jews. Of the church there we know only a little. But what we know of it rings true with the message written to it. From it the bitter perfume of a suffering church rose up to God.

Revelation 2:8–11

⁸ “And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.

⁹ “ ‘I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰ Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.’

The Character of Christ (v.8)

These are the words, the message of the Lord to them. Their particular situation and needs are met by hearing and understanding who God is in Jesus Christ is to them.

His Superiority

The first and the last

For those facing the pressure of worshipping the emperor, this was of prime importance. Against the passing claims to godhood by mortal men, stood the immutable claim of Christ as the One who is superior. He is the first. He is the last. In all things, at all times, in all ways, He is the supreme One. He is superior over all the pantheon of fabricated myths, over all the images of man-made worship, over all the imaginations of lost men, over even the passing glory of Moses and Abraham. Before anything was, He is. After all things are not, He is. His greatness is such that He stands at the beginning and at the end at the same time.

His Eternality

was dead and yet is living

Our translations miss the thrust of the Greek. Here is one who became dead and yet all the while lived. How can this meet our need?

Jesus has passed through death already. He knows and understands what suffering and loss and pain and death all mean. They are not merely abstract concepts observed in others. They are *memories* to Him. Even in this, our Lord Jesus has pioneered the way. And the greatest promise is that at the moment of our passing, we will not see death, but will blink from this life to gazing on the glory of Christ.

Jesus is yet alive. Being alive means that we can live. Physical death holds no terror for us if we have experienced the resurrection from our spiritual death, the new birth. The casting off clay means the putting on of glory. This earthly body will be shed and the heavenly donned. The caterpillar emerges a butterfly.

Dying while living is the constant reality of the Christian life. “I die daily”, Paul said. 2 Corinthians 4:10-12 puts it this way, “We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that His life may be revealed in our mortal body.”

What John wants you to feel is that sense that Jesus Christ is superior over all the demands that can be put on you. He has the right to demand your complete and total submission, reverence, and adoration. Yet He has gone through death for us. We have been released from the bondage of fearing it, from its sting and its victory. His sacrifice leaves us the pattern for our sacrifice.

The Commendation of the Church (v.9)

Once again, He knows. He does not stand aloof from all that we are going through. He knows them fully and intimately. Listen to what this church is experiencing.

Their Problems

The Lord Jesus knew their *suffering, hardships, problems, difficulties, and trials*. We need a theology of suffering for the church today. We are rife with triumphalism that denies the necessity or possibility of long-term suffering for the Christian. Here is a cluster of texts to start your thinking.

What is the New Covenant *Theology of Suffering*?

Acts 14:22 - Suffering is the lot of all entering the Kingdom.

Romans 5:1-5 - Patiently enduring suffering while believing the promises of God for the future is the fuel for joy and the environment of love.

1 Thessalonians 1:6 - Suffering accompanied by the joy given by the Holy Spirit tunes our heart to hear God's Word.

Romans 12:12 - Joy, prayer and patience are our sustaining friends in suffering.

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 - We place our suffering on the scale find it light and momentary and easy when measured against the eternal *weight* of glory it will bring.

Romans 8:35-39 - Suffering may separate us from our bodies, but never from the love of God for us in Christ. In suffering, we must never conclude that God does not love us.

2 Corinthians 1:3-7 - What we learn and how we are comforted in our own suffering equips us when others are suffering.

1 Thessalonians 3:7-8; Colossians 1:24 - Godly suffering turns outward to others, not inward to self.

2 Thessalonians 1:4 - There is no virtue in suffering itself. It is the patient enduring of suffering that produces character.

The message for all of us is simply this: Jesus Christ knows your troubles, your hardships, your suffering.

Their Poverty

This word was often used to refer to being destitute. Poverty for us usually means being without the luxuries of life. Often, the poverty of the Bible means having only the barest necessities of life. The Grand Canyon stands between what the church at Smyrna heard and what we hear in this word. Few of us have really known what it means to really be *poor*.

Their poverty arose from their unwillingness to worship Caesar. When they would not bow, they often lost their jobs. They knew what the cost could be and yet most stood true. Jesus says to them, "You may be poor in material possessions, but you are rich in heavenly treasure."

Now outward poverty does not guarantee inward spirituality. Many over the long road of church history have made that wrong turn. Nor is material prosperity necessarily a sign of spiritual poverty. But know this, to judge a believer on the basis of their net worth, rather than on their spiritual value is a serious sin.

To argue that poverty is more virtuous is also wrong. Both riches and poverty have their own special temptations and provocations. To give up all to live a simple life, to live on basic means may be full of spiritual grace... or it may simply be a means to self-boasting, to spiritual pride, to looking down on others. Poverty does not equal humility.

But riches have their own dangers. In particular, riches tend to allow us to reduce the opportunities for sacrificial suffering. It cultivates a love for ease and comfort. Riches have their own blessings if used for the advancement of God's church and kingdom.

To us Jesus says these words, "I know your financial status, your true material position. I know."

Their Pressures

Listen to how John uses this word *blasphemy* or *slander* in the Book of Revelation.

Revelation 13:1,5-8

And the dragon stood on the shore of the sea. And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. He had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on his horns and on each head a blasphemous name.

The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise his authority for forty-two months. He opened his mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven. He was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them. And he was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast—all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world.

Revelation 17:3-6

Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a desert. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. She held a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries. This title was written on her forehead:

MYSTERY BABYLON THE GREAT THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.

I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus. When I saw her, I was greatly astonished.

For John, this word is associated with those politically and religiously who defame God and destroy His people. Jesus knew about the religious persecution they were suffering. They were under tremendous pressure from apostate Jews. The weapons these Christians faced are not so much different than what we face today.

The Weapon of Slander

The word here has both the meaning of blasphemy and the meaning of slander. In the context, it could easily mean either one.

The believers at Smyrna faced the slander and lies of religious groups who elevated their own self-importance and uniqueness by slandering others. May we never, even when we strongly disagree, stoop to slander and misrepresentation in order to destroy another professing Christian. In theological debate, represent them accurately.

The claim of the Jews to being the sole people of God is represented as blasphemy. Once again, we must recognize that heresy and error are no small problems. And too often, there is outright blasphemy from many people claiming to be Evangelicals. Much of this is the popular Christian fiction as well as the pop theology.

Make no mistake about it. The character assassination, misrepresentation, slander and outright lies about one another will destroy those who participate in it. I do not care whether it is in the political realm, the theological arena, or our personal and private relations. Truth in love must govern our discussions and divisions at all times.

The Weapon of Disrespect

This church faced the situation of one religious group claiming to have sole relationship with God and the correct worship of God.

They claimed to be the true people of God. They said they were the true Jews, not these Johnny-come lately Christians. They could trace their spiritual heritage all the way back to Moses and to Abraham.

They claimed to have the true place of worship. Their synagogues were places where the Bible was read, the Law was taught and Jehovah worshipped.

But God had fulfilled what Judaism was all about. The shadow of the Old Covenant had now become the reality of Christ. Under the New Covenant, the true people of God were being gathered from all neighborhoods and all nations to worship God in spirit and truth. Now returning to Judaism, even the Judaism of the Old Testament, *was to apostatize from God*. Their place of worship of Jehovah was in reality a meeting with Satan.

We have parallels today. Many today make exclusive claims to truth and worship. And we had better be careful ourselves. We believe we are the true people of God with the Word of God and the truth of God meeting together in genuine worship of God – but *we and those who believe and worship like us, are not the only ones*. Remember, the church of the New Testament included the whole range from Ephesus to Rome to Thessalonica to Corinth. And they were still churches.

To us this message comes from the Lord of the church, “I know what they are claiming and what they are saying about you.”

The Commands to the Church (v.10)

Jesus says to them, and to us, “If what you are going through now wearies the strength of your faith, let me give you what it will take to face tomorrow.”

Do not fear

This may be poor psychology (by today’s standard) but it is great Christianity. Even if it gets worse than it is now, take heart. Don’t be afraid. Have courage. How?

Be aware of the enemy's strategies. The government is merely the instrument in the hand of Satan. Rome may come and put you in prison for your faith – see behind it the malignant

hatred of the enemy of our souls. But be not afraid, even Satan is being orchestrated by God for the purposes of His own glory.

You are being tested. The product of the fire of suffering is the gold of refined character. But the same fire that purges dross also melts the clay. Some believers are tested by prosperity, others are tested by pleasure and we are all tested by persecution and pressure. Not everyone would be thrown in prison, but all would be tested by it.

The trial will be only for a short, definite time. The *ten days* is a common way to say that something would only last a definite and endurable time. It may difficult now but the end of the tunnel is definitely there and it is out of sight just around the bend. (Even at worst, as a Christian, you can only suffer for the rest of your life.)

So, here are three statements to be relied on in faith:

- The sovereign hand of God overrules all for the best;
- The sanctifying purpose of God means we will be tested;
- The sustaining grace of God empowers us till the end.

Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer.

Do be faithful

John speaks to them about being faithful in the midst of the possibility of imprisonment, torture and death. It is faithfulness *to Christ* which is in view. They must not turn away from Him or deny Him. They must be faithful, even if it means death. They must be faithful all the way through until death.

But O what an incentive He holds out to them! His grace holds out to the faithful crowns of life. It may be that they are experiencing problems, poverty and slander – that they may be the down-trodden under the feet of the political and religious powers, but if they will be faithful all the way to the end they will be recognized and rewarded by the Lord.

How convicting this text is!

It means that faithfulness is a standard of measure for all believers. Being faithful is not a Himalayan peak only to be attained by a select few. I know that is what it seems like. But no, faithfulness is a basic requirement for all.

Faithfulness is grown in the soil of daily disciplines and weekly responsibilities. It is threatened by the prevailing winds of sin and the frost of cold hearts and the weeds of wasted or wanted time. It is cultivated by diligence, fertilized by the Word and watered by prayer. Faithfulness' harvest is a lifetime of obedience and recognition and reward from our Lord.

If we do not develop faithfulness in the small things, *you will probably not be faithful in the big things*. If Super Bowl or work or family draws away, what would prison and torture and death do?

There are no excuses:

I know your troubles, your hardships, your suffering;

I know your financial condition;

I know what others are saying about you;

Do not be afraid and be faithful no matter what it costs.

The Challenge for the Church (v.11)

The challenge is repeated: if we have hearing ears, this is what the Spirit says. Overcomers, that is to say, true believers will not be harmed by the second death of punishment in hell. We can face the first death with without fear and in faithfulness because we have been delivered from the second death.

Reflect and Respond

One of things that I see in this text is the difference between appearance and reality. They appeared poor but were rich. They faced death but were alive. Their religious opponents appeared to be theologically correct while they were really Satanically inspired. Their troubles appeared to be from Rome while actually behind the throne was Satan. Do you ever wonder about appearances and realities in our own lives?

Let us return to the opening scene and listen to our martyr's prayer.

“Father of Your well-beloved and blessed Son, Jesus Christ through whom we have received the gift of knowing You. The God of angels, powers, and all creation and of all the family of the righteous that live before You. I bless You that You have thought me worthy of the present day and hour, to have a share in the number of the martyrs and in the cup of Christ, unto the resurrection of eternal life, both of the soul and the body, in the incomparable joy of the Holy Spirit. Among whom may I be received in Your sight, this day, as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, even as You, the faithful and true God, have prepared, have shown and fulfilled. Wherefore, on this account, and for all things I praise You, I bless You, I glorify You through the eternal high priest, Jesus Christ, Your well-beloved Son. Through whom glory be to You with Him in the Holy Spirit, both now and forever. Amen. Amen”

The fire was kindled. In great flames, the sacrifice rose up unto God in a sweet-smelling perfume and a great witness to the invincible grace of God. So died, Polycarp, student of John the Apostle, pastor-teacher of the church of Smyrna, and one of seven recipients of the Book of the Revelation from John's hand.

The Lord knows our problems, our financial position, and our pressures. But we are not to be afraid of what may lie ahead. We are to be faithful no matter what the cost. For He is holding out for us, a crown of life.

ⁱ This account is adapted from *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius and *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. The translation has been updated in contemporary English with some of the quotes reduced for clarity and brevity.