

The Voice of Truth # 474

The Church That Deserted Christ

We've come now to study Christ's second letter addressed to the pastor of the church in Smyrna, the church in tribulation. With Bibles in hand, let's read this letter, found there in the 2nd chapter of Revelation, beginning with verse 8, Revelation 2:8. Let's read it.

And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive;

I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and *I know* the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but *are* the synagogue of Satan.

Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast *some* of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.

Before we proceed to study this letter, let's first look at the location of this church in Smyrna. We are told that the city was founded by Alexander and is claimed as the birthplace of Homer, the Greek poet. In its early days, it was considered the most beautiful city in Asia Minor. It was noted for its library, its heathen temples, its sacred festivals and sports. So, you see, the church was situated right in the heart of heathenism or pagan idolatry. The church, no doubt, was founded during Paul's evangelistic work in Ephesus. It was the church where Polycarp did his great preaching and teaching and suffered martyrdom. Let me pause here and give you an account of his death. It was possible that Polycarp was pastor of the church at Smyrna at the time this letter was dictated to John. Polycarp was saved under John's preaching, and at this time was a young man, but in the year 155 A.D., he was asked to say, **Caesar is Lord**, But he refused. Then he was brought to the stadium, or the great arena, and the high official urged him, saying, Swear that

Caesar is Lord, and I will set thee at liberty, reproach Christ! Polycarp answered the official in these words, "Eighty and six years have I served Christ, and he never did me any injury. How then can I blaspheme my King and my Redeemer?" When the official again pressed him to reproach Christ, the old man answered, "Since thou art vainly urging that I should swear by the fortune of Caesar, and pretendest not to know who and what I am, hear me declare with boldness, I am a Christian." A little later, the official answers, I have wild beasts at my hands, sir, to these will I cast thee, except thou repent. Then afterward I will cause thee to be consumed by fire, seeing thou despisest the wild beast, if thou wilt not repent.' Then Polycarp answered him in these words, Thou threatenest me with fire, which burneth 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 tarryst thou? Bring forth what thou wilt. Then the people began to gather wood and faggots, the Jews especially, which according to their custom, when a Christian was condemned to be burned, they helped them gather the wood. There we see Polycarp burned at the stake.

My friend, this gives you some idea of what this church at Smyrna was suffering and why we call it the Church in Tribulation. Christ's message of this church stands as a comfort to suffering believers of all ages, and to us especially in this age who are having to stand out against all the combined religious forces of the earth, which are now uniting, that they might silence the voice that exalts Christ as Lord. Let me cry out from the depths of my soul, across the ether waves, Christ is Lord! Every believer knows that Christ is his Lord, and he would rather go to the stake than deny him. Christ addresses this letter to the pastor of the church at Smyrna, as he does all the other churches, because he holds the pastor responsible for the church. His message to every one of his pastors is set forth in 2 Timothy 4:1,2, listen, I charge thee therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ who shall judge the living and the dead, at his appearing in his kingdom. Preach the Word! Be instant in season, out of season, reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. God's pastor is to preach the Word. Preach it whether men believe it or not. Preach it if you have to burn at the stake. If you call yourself a preacher of the gospel and preach not the word, get out of the pulpit and blaspheme not the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. The church, the Smyrna Church, was located in the midst of a wealthy, prosperous and pagan city, probably with

Polycarp as pastor. He was a young man, had only been a Christian 14 years when this letter was written to this church. The word Smyrna comes from the word myrrh, which means bitterness and is associated with death. It is used here to represent the persecuted church. Myrrh had to be crushed in order to give out its fragrance. We see here a church crushed beneath the iron heel of pagan Rome, yet it gave out sweet fragrance to the Lord Jesus Christ. Now get this truth, myrrh in the Song of Solomon is used as one of the love perfumes of the bride. We behold here suffering, tribulation, dying, and yet love. Suffering on the part of a believer is a mystery to the world, as well as the love of a believer. The world never has, never will understand either. The church in Smyrna was poor in the midst of riches and they could not understand such suffering on the part of these believers in the midst of poverty which made so because they knew the Lord Jesus Christ and would not deny him. Brother, there's something else in this world besides money. I want you to know that thing. If we understand these words, then we can understand why Christ addressed them in these words. These things saith the first and the last, which was dead and is alive. To this church and its sufferings, trials and poverty, he addresses him as the first and the last. This is one of the grandest divine titles that was ever given our Lord. He is the first. There is no beginning. He is the last. There is no ending. He is from everlasting to everlasting. Therefore, this title is a rock against which the utmost power of Satan and all of his emissaries is futile. He's the first. He is before all in time. He's above all as supreme. He's beneath all as the solid rock, our foundation. He's around all, our eternal protection. He indwells his own, the eternal Lord of glory. Then he's the last, therefore he's after all. He closes all the gaps. Everything points to him. He's the eternal one. He's eternal in his being. Yet he stooped to die. Therefore, death had no claim because he's the first and the last. Then these believers at Smyrna had nothing to fear. You and I who know him have nothing to fear. That has been my stay, the rock of my eternal salvation in Christ through the years.

During the 20 years of persecution that I went through with at the hands of unsaved religionists, He was my first and my last. Every moment they had to deal with Him because I am His and He is mine. Then we come to these words, **which was dead and is alive**. Which means he became dead. He rode the waves of death. He arose out from among the dead. And now he lives to die no more. As he said to Mary, I'm the resurrection and the life. He that believeth on me shall

never die. He is saying to this church at Smyrna, you have nothing to fear. I suffered all that you will suffer. I rose out of it. I live, thou shalt live. As you meet death, I will be with you. I will never leave thee nor forsake thee. Those were glorious words that morning, when the women came from the empty tomb and heard from the lips of the angels. He's risen! He's not here. Come see the place where the Lord lay. I know my Lord liveth. I know He died. I know that He arose from among the dead. I know that he came out from the grave a resurrected body. I know we are now the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be. But I know when he shall appear, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

Then our Lord goes on writing to the church in these words, "I know thy tribulation and thy poverty, but thou art rich". Here in the city of Smyrna, where the believers were hated without a cause, the Jews, in order to reveal their hatred for the believers, would publish untrue statements concerning them as to their character, their purpose, and their manner of life. These stories, told by these ungodly Jews, which represent the unsaved religionists of our day, excited the pagan population of that city, which was governed by pagan Rome, and led them to take their property away from them by whatever means they could, turn them out of employment, that they might reduce them to the point of poverty and starvation. These believers were boycotted, hated, despised, and belittled both by the Jews, the unsaved religionists, the pagans, and idol worshipers. Being turned out of their homes, they had to live in caves, Catacombs, or wherever they could find a place to abide. They did not have chapels or beautiful churches to worship in. They worshipped in caves and then under strict guards who would report the approaching enemy. I wonder how many of us who say that we know Christ, if that should befall us, would we betray him? How do you stand? I'm afraid the average individual today who says, I'm a Christian, I would not stand for Christ if such persecution broke out. Christ said to these persecuted believers, I know all about it. I know all about it.

So, Christ as the first and the last was a great comfort to these persecuted disciples. They knew that the Lord Jesus Christ was the living one who had passed through death. and had come out with the keys of death and Hades and knew all about them. Christ knew how many of them had suffered martyrdom, either had

been starved to death or had been slain. He said, I know what you're suffering. I know what you're going through. I've been there. I came out alive. You look to me as the one who has redeemed you with his own precious blood, the one who went to the cross and died as your substitute, paid your sin-debt in full. You look to me as the one who went down in the dark caverns of death, the dark night of the tomb, as your scapegoat, carrying your sins far away. You look to me as one who was dead, yet is alive forevermore. And if I live, you will continue to live.

Let's notice this fact, that nowhere in this letter to this persecuted church did Christ offer a solution to their earthly problems. Nowhere did he give them one bit of encouragement that the persecution would soon be over and they'd be given back their jobs and their property. Instead of holding out hope, he said to them, get ready to die. Get this truth, the hope of the born-again believer is Christ and Christ only. And to know Him experimentally is the only thing that matters in this life. He says, I know the cause of all this. It was caused by the blasphemy of those that say they are Jews and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan. Did you notice the contrast here? The synagogue of Satan and the church of Smyrna. There were the wealthy, social, worldly, praised, unsaved religionists that had plenty, lacked nothing, and lived in the hay day. Christ said, I see them, I know them, that's the synagogue of Satan. Then he looked over there and saw that group of born-again believers, reduced to poverty, begging for a living, living in caves on the mountain sides, driven from pillar to post, having no certain dwelling place to lay their heads. And he says, I know, my children, I've been there. I was driven to death by that same crowd. I was hunted like a beast of prey. They hounded me from my birth to my grave. They told every lie in hell and out of hell on me. They said I was an imposter, wine-dibber, drunkard, illegitimate child of a harlot. They also said I was a gluttonous man. They arrested me, tried me, condemned me to die and crucified me, and carried out God's eternal purpose for your salvation. But I am alive now. I came forth from the grave. My eye is upon you. You look to me. I see and understand every move that's made.

But over against this material poverty, thou art rich. But thou art rich. These four little words are weighed with diamonds. But thou art rich. Thou art wealthy. I know the world despises you. I know the world looks down upon you. I know they hate you. I see you starving to death, but I am in the midst of you, my little

children. You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, that ye through his poverty might become rich. He was saying, one day I was made to cry, the foxes have holes, the birds of the air have nests, but the son of man hath not where to lay his head. Though He was the Creator of heaven and earth, I gave up heaven and all my glory, and came into this world and was obedient unto death. I was reduced to poverty and want. As a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so I opened not my mouth. As your substitute, I went to the cross and paid the sacrifice for your sins. I went to the grave and arose victorious, that thou through my poverty might become rich. Thou art rich! You get that? One day Paul was grappling in the Spirit with the purposes of Almighty God. He was made to cry out, O the depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God, and how unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out. And again, or despisest thou the riches of His goodness. You know, let's fall at the feet of Christ and revel in His goodness, the riches of His goodness, the riches of His grace, the riches of His mercy, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins. He said, **but thou art rich**, listen to the Word of God; **But God, who is rich in mercy, for His great love, wherewith He loved us**. Listen again, **that in the ages to come he might show the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus, our Lord**. Oh, my friends, the riches, the riches of God. And as we run our hands through the treasure chest of God, we behold the diamonds of his goodness, the gold of his grace, the pearls of his mercy, the necklace of his love, the bracelet of his peace. What else do you want?

In the face of such riches, in our blessed Lord, the world fades away, and as the world fades into insignificance, it leaves me, my blessed Lord, with all of His wealth, beauty, and glory. He lives, I live. It may be in rags, it may be in poverty, it may be in want, but one day He will raise us up as heirs of the King. Then Christ said to these poverty-stricken members, Fear none of those things which thou suffer. Behold, the devil shall cast some of you in prison, that ye may be tried, and ye shall have tribulation ten days. Some of them were in prison then. Later on, many of them were cast into prison. One day fifteen hundred were murdered on the mountain side there in Smyrna. Their blood ran down like rivulets, but get it, friends, Smyrna is the only church out of the seven that's living today. It's the only one that's had a continuous history for these 1900 years. Praise the Lord for

suffering. We learn obedience through suffering. We learn patience through tribulation. He said here, be thou faithful unto death, not until death. That is the end of our natural life, but unto death, which means most of them were going to suffer martyrdom. He also told them that this persecution is not going to ensue. Ten days, there is a mystical number, which means ten periods of intense persecutions they went through with, which covered a period of over 200 years, when the Roman kings swore that they would blot Christianity off of the face of the earth. Martyrdom is the seat of the Church. Then he said, You be faithful unto death, I'll give thee a crown of life. That's the victor's crown. It doesn't matter under what conditions we live. Let us be faithful unto Christ. He was faithful unto us on the cross. My friends, and I will give thee the martyr's crown. Bless their hearts. I wish we knew what it was to suffer for Christ. Then we'd be able to tell the world what Christ means to us.

We're also told that this crown that he promised is a crown of royalty, that it is the crown of royalty victorious, it's a crown laden with spoils, the crown of added wealth, it's the crown of life, it is the crown given to one because he has won the crown, which he has obtained through severe conflict. He is saying to these persecuted believers, fight on, trust on, live on, look to me as you pass through the darkness, because on the other side is a perfect life. He didn't hold out to them any relief from suffering in this present life. He did hold up to them the crown of life they'd receive on the other side for being faithful unto death. He said, you have never been brought to hunger and to long for Christ. Have you, my friend, listen, have you ever been brought to long for Christ? You don't know Christ like that. The average individual doesn't.

In closing with this great promise, **he that hath an ear Let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches. He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.** The second death. We notice in our last study that the overcoming one, according to 1 John 5:4 is the born-again one. He that is born of God overcometh the world. Then Christ said here, this one born of the Spirit, washed in the blood, delivered by his power, made a new creature in Christ, indwelt by his spirit, kept by his power, shall be delivered from what? The second death. What is the second death? Revelation 20:14. **And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And whosoever was not found in the book of**

life was cast into the lake of fire. Listen again, Revelation 21:8 **But the fearful, and the unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whomongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.** This is the eternal state of the wicked, and means separation from God forever. As the first death is the separation of the soul from the body, so the second death is the separation of the unbeliever from God, from heaven, from eternal life, from God the Father, from the Lord Jesus Christ, from the Holy Spirit, and from all born-again ones who shall inherit heaven. So, Christ made this statement to those who pass through the throes of physical death, ye shall not be touched with the second death. Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! The Lord God omnipotent reigneth. What a Savior. All praise and honor and glory and might and dominion be unto him that was and is and is to come, who is the first and the last, who was dead but is alive forevermore, who has the keys of death and Hades, who is our crucified, buried, risen, exalted, glorified, reigning Lord. Amen, amen, and amen.

Oh, my friends, do you know Him? Do you know the Christ that those folks at Smyrna knew? It was the shortest letter written of the seven. Not one word of complaint did our risen Lord have from that church. Oh, my friends, they knew Him. Do you know Christ experimentally? Do you know Him? Do you know Christ? Would you die for Him? Would you go to the stake this morning, if need be, and say, Christ is Lord! I will not deny Him. I'll burn before I'll deny Him. Will you?