

Believers in Smyrna: The Suffering Church

by Phil Beach Jr.

The sermon highlights the qualities of the church in Smyrna, including their works of love and obedience, their endurance in tribulation and poverty, and their faithfulness in the face of persecution, and encourages listeners to follow their example and remain faithful to Jesus even in the midst of suffering.

Scripture: Matthew 5:11, 2 Timothy 3:12, James 1:12, 1 Peter 4:12, Revelation 2:8

Topics: "Persecution", "Faithfulness"

Description

Phil Beach Jr. preaches on the church in Smyrna from the book of Revelation, highlighting their commendable qualities and the suffering they endured for their faith. Jesus warns that His faithful followers will face persecution, trials, and even death for His sake, but promises the crown of life to those who remain faithful. The believers in Smyrna were praised for their works that were rooted in God's love, their endurance through tribulation and poverty, and their refusal to deny Christ despite facing slander and persecution from those who opposed them.

Transcript

Rev. 2: 8-11 After the Lord Jesus was taken up to heaven, He spoke by the Holy Spirit through those whom He had appointed and they in turn wrote accounts of His earthly life and ministry, as well as letters which later became the Bible that we use today. However, after many years, the Lord Jesus appeared to John and spoke again, and at that time felt it was necessary to give some last words to the church, which we find in the book of Revelation--in particular the letters to the churches in chapters 2 and 3.

One of the central words in these letters to the churches is the word, "repent". However there are two letters, those to Smyrna and Philadelphia, in which that word does not occur. The Lord had nothing but good to say to these two assemblies, a fact that is quite significant. Surely this does not mean that those believers in these two churches did not need to repent. Contrariwise, because they had very tender hearts and lived a life of daily repentance, they were able to live in the good of Christ's life and love.

We already looked at the church in Philadelphia and considered what our Lord had to say to them. Now, as we look at the message He gave to those living in Smyrna, we can examine some of the qualities for which this church was commended and pray that we too may be found growing in similar spiritual features. However, it is unlikely that we can know the particular blessing of this group of saints unless we come to know the suffering that they endured for their Lord's name. Jesus repeatedly said that the world loves its own and those who do not show the world its sin are no threat.

However those who are abiding in the light of the Lamb and are living lives full of His moral brightness and beauties, will be both hated and rejected by the world. Our Lord warned that all of His faithful followers would be persecuted for His sake and that some would be dragged before the governments of this world and sentenced to horrible suffering and some to death. He further warned them that a day would come when they would be hunted as if they were criminals, all because of the testimony of the living Christ radiating from their lives.

All of the apostles as well, exhorted the church to be faithful in the persecutions that would come to all who live godly lives. Peter stated that those who are living in union with Christ and in obedience to His Words are not to think it strange when all kinds of fiery trials come to them, knowing that such a time is used by the Lord to strengthen their faith. James uses similar words as does John in his epistles. The writer of the book of Hebrews includes an entire chapter showing the suffering, as well as the blessings, of God's children because of their obedience and faith in the living God.

With this abundant evidence from God's Word it is clear that any time God's people are living in union with their Lord deeply enough to obey His teachings and become a bright light of His moral perfections in their actions and lifestyles, they will suffer. Now, let's look to see God's Word to this group of suffering saints. As we look at the name Smyrna we find that it comes from a word meaning myrrh. Myrrh is the resinous gum that oozes from incisions on the stems and branches of a shrubby tree native to South Arabia.

Myrrh was an ingredient of the holy anointing oil. It was also prized for its aromatic qualities, and used in cosmetic preparations. Myrrh was presented to the baby Jesus by the Magi and used to anoint His body after His death. It possesses many healing qualities and was used for medicinal purposes. This word is indicative of the life of Christ, His divine nature and character along with the healing He brings to those who partake of His grace. What a place to begin! How deeply we need to be immersed into the "myrrh" of God, so that He becomes in us the holy anointing oil, the aroma that fills our life, and the inward beauty that is reflected in all we say and do!

As well, if we are to be a people of myrrh, of the spiritual caliber of the church of Smyrna, we are going to have to accept, in a very deep way, the claim of Christ as He calls us to lay down our lives to follow Him. These believers lived in the reality of the words of Paul when he said that they that live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution. There is no shortcut to know the "myrrh" of God. The way to life in Jesus is a merciless death to all that is in us that is contrary to His life and character, brought about by the skilled hand of our faithful High Priest who alone can wield the sharp, twoedged sword into the deepest part of our being and cut out all that is not like Him.

When such a work of God's grace is wrought, we see three specific things our Lord mentions, namely, our works, tribulation and poverty (wealth too) and the suffering and persecution from the devil and those who are being moved by His hate, that follow. (Rev. 2:9,10). Works by God's love Paul said that faith, which works by love (the God-kind of love, which produces obedience to the Lord's words and selfless service toward on another), fulfills the whole law. We saw this abounding quality in the believers that lived in Philadelphia and we see it here too among these dear ones of the Lord.

Jesus says to this group, "I know your works, (Rev. 2:9)..." No, doubt the works Jesus is referring to were those that were wrought by the love of God bursting forth in their lives. Let's look at the works that God honors and loves to see, that come out of His love working in the souls of those who are living in His divine life. This is truly what love in action looks like: "If I had the gift of being able to speak in other languages

without learning them, and could speak in every language there is in all of heaven and earth, but didn't love others, I would only be making noise.

If I had the gift of prophesy and knew all about what is going to happen in the future, knew everything about everything, but didn't love others, what good would it do? Even if I had the gift of faith so that I could speak to a mountain and make it move, I would still be worth nothing at all without love. If I gave everything I had to poor people, and if I were burned alive for preaching the Gospel but didn't love others, it would be of no value whatever. Love is very patient and kind, never jealous or envious, never boastful or proud, never haughty or selfish or rude.

Love does not demand its own way. It is not irritable or touchy. It does not hold grudges and will hardly even notice when others do it wrong. It is never glad about injustice, but rejoices whenever truth wins out. If you love someone you will be loyal to Him no matter what the cost. You will always believe in him, always expect the best of him, and always stand your ground in defending him. All the special gifts and powers from God will someday come to an end, but love goes on forever" (The Living Bible).

May the Lord help us to submit deeply to His life and Spirit so that our lives may be filled with the works that are wrought by Jesus Christ, working in and through us by faith and love. Only works with this quality-- that they spring out of the very life of Jesus in us--are acceptable to God and will bring lasting glory and fruit for Him to enjoy. Tribulation, Poverty and Wealth for Jesus' Sake Next, these believers were up against terrible tribulation. This word tribulation means affliction, the deep pressure of crushing affliction.

The language used would indicate that the trials and sufferings that these believers were being called to endure because of their faith and testimony in Christ were of the most severe kind! However, in spite of the deepest and most devastating kind of suffering, the abundant grace of God was holding these dear ones and helping them to hold fast and not deny their Lord! What a faithful Savior! No doubt they were being filled with the comfort of Christ that abounds towards those who suffer for His sake and they were able to share that comfort with others too.

In addition to enduring under much tribulation, this church bore up under poverty. The idea of this kind of poverty is the state of having nothing and being destitute--to the point of begging. During the time of the writing of Revelation, Rome had instituted a law stating that the citizen's first loyalty was to the state. Each year the citizens of the Empire had to prove their loyalty by going before chosen local government officials and declaring, "Caesar is Lord". Anyone who refused to vow their allegiance to Caesar quickly lost their standing in the community, losing their jobs and rights to buy and sell!

At times even their property, homes and lands were confiscated and they were charged as lawbreakers. Though outwardly poor and often destitute of material things, this group of believers was inwardly full of spiritual wealth--Jesus said that they were rich! They were being faithful to their Lord and enduring under the most difficult conditions, not denying His name. Additionally, they were expressing the beauties of Christ's life and love, being seen in love toward their enemies, joy in the midst of their sorrows, peace in spite of their pain and torment, patience and longsuffering under periods of trial and testing, faith in times of hopeless circumstances and gentleness towards those who were everything but gentle toward them!

This dear one is true wealth and the kind that lasts when all else fails. Jesus said we are to be rich toward God. In another place He said that we are to store up for ourselves treasure in heaven. This is exactly the kind of wealth these dear ones had in their possession. Never could a thief steal this treasure from them

nor could rust corrupt and destroy. No, this is the kind of wealth that is safe and that brings great glory to God, both now and in the age to come! Also, Jesus noted that He was quite aware of the abusive slander and reviling from those who said they were Jews but were not, but were of the synagogue of Satan.

Historians tell us that there were a large number of Jews in this city who hated those that believed on the Lord Jesus. They believed themselves to be true Jews but were, as Jesus said, part of Satan's church. Paul makes it very clear that a true Jew is not one of outward circumcision but one of inward cleansing by the work of God's Spirit, whose praise is not of men but of God. He further tells us that a true Jew is not a person from an earthly race of people, such as the natural descendents of Abraham, but a true Jew is one who walks in the same faith as Abraham.

Jesus said that Abraham rejoiced to see the day of Christ, unlike these Jews who hated and killed Him. Though God will yet have mercy on the nation of Israel in the days to come, it is clear from God's Word that only those who accept Christ Jesus as Lord and Savior can claim to be true Jews in heart and spirit. Christ was so opposed to these outward Jews that hated and reviled His followers that He called them members of Satan's synagogue. Jesus knows what is happening and the pain that comes with such suffering as He suffered too, leaving us an example to follow.

These are comforting words to those who are being assaulted for the testimony of Christ. With this word of comfort, the Lord Jesus gives sober warning and counsel to His followers. He says to them that more persecution is coming and that the devil is going to throw some of them into prison and that for ten days they would be tried and tested. Then, He counsels them to be faithful to death and they would receive the crown of life. Notice that Jesus said that Satan would be the one to throw some of them into prison.

Satan Seeks to Kill True Followers of the Lamb This brings light to us as we ponder this. Satan is the one who hates the Lord Jesus so much and when He sees the life, love and moral likeness of the Son of God being mirrored in those who are following Lamb, then his hatred is stirred to great intensity. Satan knows that the true church is an ever increasing expression of the moral likeness of her Head, the Lord Jesus. They are those who keep His commandments and have no confidence in their own works.

To such, the wrath and hatred of Satan is always manifest. But the Lord Jesus promises that these believers who suffer such wrath by Satan will be given the crown of life if they remain faithful even to death! What an incredible promise. To bring comfort to such, Jesus, in His first words to this church said He was the one who become dead for a short time but now is alive for evermore and holds the keys of death in His hand. He is able to raise up from the dead anyone who dies for His name's sake.

This is wonderful encouragement to all who are facing the prospect of death and severe suffering for the sake of Christ and His Word. Here is quotation from a brother who lives in China that has come to know patient endurance in the midst of suffering: "Dear brothers and sisters: I feel it is of utmost importance for the saints in the so-called free world to notice and heed the great, amazing work our wonderful God has been doing in China -- a country of 1.3 billion people with more than 100 million born-again believers (Christians and Catholics) (Psalm 28:5) at the last hour of the New Testament dispensation -- right before the fire of that day (I Cor. 3:13; "that day": Heb. 10:25; I Thess. 5:4; I Cor. 1:8, 4:5).

In the unprecedented fiery trial of the last half century in mainland China (1956 being the peak), the saints who glorified God have been those who, though most of them unknown and not gifted, had been humbly and faithfully abiding in the Lord (I John 2:27-28; John 15:1-8) -- the fountain of life "in Whom dwells all the fullness of the God-head bodily and ye are filled full in Him" (Col. 2:9). This was also confirmed in the

experiences of the Old Testaments prophets. Prophet Jeremiah prophesied in the darkest period of the history of Judah for 40 years (before the captivity).

He was not received or accepted by the kings, princes, priests and scribes, and the people. On the contrary, he was again and again severely persecuted -- nearly unto death. In spite of all these tribulations, he faithfully continued his ministry, as he himself testified: Blessed is the man that confideth in Jehovah, and whose confidence Jehovah is. For he shall be like a tree planted by the waters, and that spreadeth out its roots by the stream, and he shall not see when heat cometh, but his leaf shall be green, and in the year of drought he shall not be careful, neither shall he cease to yield fruit. (Jer. 17:7-8; "waters" and "stream" refer to the fountain of living waters; "heat" and "year of drought" refer to trials, persecutions, sufferings.)" Bro.

Joshua Yu Christ Alone Must Occupy First Place Before we finish prayerfully pondering this section of God's Word let's turn our attention to some of the very first words that Jesus spoke to this church. Referring to Himself, Jesus stated that He was the First and the Last. Historians tell us that Smyrna was a very proud city. They called themselves the first city in Asia taking much pride in their beauty and culture. However, Jesus clearly says that He is the first one and the last one.

How subtle it is to begin to place oneself as first. By nature we like to be first and to have the pre-eminence. This can happen in many ways, each of which can become deadly! Wanting to be first also speaks of the craving to be seen by men and to have authority to make decisions and carry out one's plans. Today, lots of people like to be the boss of their lives, accountable to no one but themselves, surrounding themselves with "yes" men instead of those who would challenge them and point out their shortcomings.

Many have sought to start their own businesses for comfort and convenience sake so they do not have to travel to work or be under anyone's authority. Consequently, they become their own boss, make their own decisions about their business, create their own work schedules and often become employers who hire others to work for them. Of course there is nothing inherently wrong with this. But there is a subtle danger that lurks in this kind of a setting, the one that the city of Smyrna fell into.

When one becomes accustomed to being first, not having to submit to anyone, being able to make one's own decisions and even is leading others, being looked up to as "the boss", it is easy to develop a subtle ego and pride that becomes unwilling to bend to the Lordship of Jesus and counsel of others. This holds true not only for selfemployed persons, but also for those who are in companies where positions of authority are regularly being jockeyed for. Even a marriage relationship can become deadly spiritually if both seek to cater to each other's sins, lusts and desire to be first, instead of lovingly rebuking each other when any form of this sin surfaces.

Adam and Eve fell into this trap and so can we if we are not very careful. Ananias and Saphira, as well, picture for us the kind of marriage relationship where each partner fuels and enables the sins of the other. There is an illusion that captures the heart of man so easily. When man seeks to be the first one, the one who is succeeding in business, growing in material wealth and influence and gaining the seat of independence and personal power and authority over others, while being in the limelight and increasingly being seen, the heart is prone to take pride in its position, forgetting that the Lord Jesus alone is the first one.

He alone is the one with supreme authority and power to use for His own holy and eternal purposes. Authority is a dangerous thing! Wanting to be first and being seen as first by others can be a tragic snare. Our hearts are not fashioned to be able to handle authority and the illustrious title of being number one. Only as we place all that we are and possess into the hands of our Lord and allow Him to be the Head, the one who governs our lives and decisions, can we be sure that we will not be corrupted by the subtle, imaginary illusion that we are in some way capable of knowing what is right for both ourselves and others.

Unless He remains the first one in our hearts and we are constantly looking to him for guidance and counsel, we will, as this city of Smyrna, fall into the snare of pride of heart and be corrupted. This is exactly what happened to Satan and caused his fall; he wanted to be number one because of his beauty! We simply do not know what is best for ourselves or others and should we have authority in the smallest way on earth, we will eventually be corrupted, abusing our authority and using it to further our own interests, no matter how hard we try to do what is right, and hurting not only ourselves, but others in the process.

Only in Christ's hands are we safe and only under His constant leading and guidance can we know we are doing what is right in His eyes! Remember that Jesus alone is the one to whom all power in heaven and earth has been given and He alone is able to wield such power and remain pure and without corruption. He alone is truly fair toward all men and does what is right at all times in any given situation. Only His counsel can free us from our wrong motives. Power does not corrupt the Son of God but will corrupt the sons of men, including those who are saved by His grace!

I hope we can receive this truth, dear ones and stay guarded. In His final words, Christ comforted this group of believers greatly by assuring them that He was the First and Last--the one who had been dead and was now alive forever. He was aware of their poverty and assured them that from heaven's standpoint they were wealthy indeed. Christ also proved that He was very aware of the tribulations this church was enduring for His name's sake and warned them that Satan was going to cast some of them into prison to be tested.

He promised the crown of life to those who remain faithful to Him even to death! God's final promise to these believers was that they would not be harmed by the second death! Though some of them would have to suffer by Satan's hand and die, they would never be subject to the lake of fire! What a blessed church they were. May the Lord give us grace to live as they did and to endure the suffering that will come should we be willing and obedient to walk in His ways. Surely, Paul's words ring true with these dear ones, "You have not only been called to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ but also to suffer for His name's sake!"

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