

Pr Mark Turner: Smyrna (27/7/19)

Scripture Reading: Revelation 2:8-11

Introduction:

If your Bible has subheadings it will say something like "the suffering church" or "the persecuted church."

The emperor of the time was Domitian. He was a tyrant who wished to be worshipped. The greeting of that time in the Roman Empire was 'Caesar is Lord.' The prevailing spirit of this greeting was consistent with that of Emperor Domitian. This, of course, made it difficult for a Christian to be uncompromising.

Even today, Christianity is the most persecuted religion in the world (according to a study done by Pew Research).

245 million Christians are persecuted for their faith in the top 50 most persecuted countries in the world. There are 60+ countries in the world where it is dangerous to be a Christian.

To some extent, all of us will experience opposition if we choose to follow Christ.

- **Philippians 1:29**
- **1 Peter 4:12-14**
- **2 Timothy 3:12**

City:

Smyrna was the second of the 7 churches that was situated on the coast. Like Ephesus, Smyrna had a harbour. Smyrna was said to be the most beautiful city in Asia Minor.

Commercially, Smyrna was a rival to Ephesus. It was also the only city in the Roman Empire that had a 3-level shopping centre.

Smyrna's citizens were so loyal to Rome that they built a temple in 195BC where Rome was worshipped.

Rome rewarded Smyrna for their loyalty by dedicating their temple to Tiberius Caesar. Smyrna was also home to a large population of Jewish people.

Church:

Acts 19:10 suggests that the church was founded during Paul's third missionary journey.

Under Domitian it became a capital offence to refuse to offer the yearly sacrifice to the emperor. Many Christians were martyred for this reason.

The large Jewish population were strongly opposed to Christianity.

As the church struggled against these two hostile forces, persecution and suffering seemed inevitable.

Correspondent:

Revelation 2:8 - "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, 'These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life.'"

Notice the key phrases that Jesus uses to introduce Himself to the suffering church in Smyrna. He calls Himself the "first and last" and tells that he was "dead and came to life."

These two phrases are taken from **Revelation 1:17,18**.

The designation of Christ was to comfort the persecuted believers at Smyrna. In **Hebrews 2:14,15** Paul says that Jesus came to earth so that He could relate to our suffering.

But, Jesus had conquered death, so when he came to Smyrna as He that had 'come back to life' He offered them hope beyond their persecution.

Commendation:

Revelation 2:9 - "I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan."

In the Greek, the word "tribulation" literally means "pressure."

The same Greek word is used in **John 16:33** and **Acts 14:21,22**. We must, Paul seems to be saying, experience the cross before we can wear the crown.

In Smyrna, this pressure was experienced in 3 ways:

1. They refused to offer sacrifices to the emperor.
2. They refused to participate in pagan religion in general.
3. They faced "the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan."

Jesus also spoke of their poverty. In the Greek, this word literally describes beggars, not just someone who has less than others. Many of the Christians were slaves.

"But you are rich," Jesus encourages them. Not in possessions, but in those things that really matter.

- Salvation
- Holiness
- Grace
- Peace
- Fellowship
- A sympathetic Saviour and comforter

Command:

Revelation 2:10 - "Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life."

The command that Jesus gives to the suffering church in Smyrna is "do not fear what you are about to suffer."

In a lot of ways, Jesus says, things are going to get worse than they have been. There will be no reprieve, no respite, you will be 'tested 10 days.'

This ten day period could be referring back to events like:

- **Daniel 1** - the ten day test and Daniel's fidelity in the midst of the trial.
- **Job** - Job's fidelity in loss and trial

Jesus tells the church in Smyrna that Satan will be coming to test them.

- **Luke 22:31,32** - Integrity is tested under trial.
- **James 1:2-4** - Endurance is perfected under trial.
- **1 Peter 1:6,7** - Genuineness of faith is demonstrated through testing.

Counsel:

Revelation 2:10,11 - "Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death."

Jesus encourages the church to be faithful to death and He will reward them with a crown of life.

- **James 1:12**
- **2 Timothy 4:8**

'Listen to what the Spirit says to you,' Jesus says. 'Whoever overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.'

In this context the overcoming refers to the willingness to die rather than being unfaithful.

Revelation 5:1-5,9 - Jesus overcame, which made Him worthy to open the scroll. He overcame, according to verse 9, by dying before compromising.

Revelation 12:11 - "And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death."

You may not be called to being a martyr, but you are, in its stead, called to be faithful to your test. God gives us grace for today's trial. If it is not martyrdom today, you will not be given grace for that today. He will give you grace for tomorrow's trial tomorrow.

Revelation 2:11B - "He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death."

If we are faithful to God and we are called to die the first death, God has promised us that the second death has no power over us.

Revelation 20:4-6 - "And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them. Then *I* saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received *his* mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished. This *is* the first resurrection. Blessed and holy *is* he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years."

Conclusion:

Jesus encourages us to rejoice when we are made to suffer for His sake (Matthew 5:11,12). Ultimately, this is an honour!