

## SMRYNA – “THE SUFFERING CHURCH”

Revelation 2:8-11

Two weeks ago, we visited the First Christian Church of Ephesus; a congregation which the risen Jesus praised for its hard work, perseverance, and doctrinal purity, but also rebuked for its loss of “first love.” Today we travel thirty-five miles north to the First Christian Church of Smyrna—often called “the suffering church” because of the hardships it endured for the sake of Christ. And as before, we’ll discuss the city, the church, and finally, the content of Christ’s letter to the Smyrnan Christians.

**First, the city of Smyrna.** In antiquity Smyrna was known as the “Glory of Asia.” It was a prosperous city, ideally located for commerce. Its harbor was deeper and better sheltered than the one in Ephesus, and could be completely closed in times of war.

Smyrna was also situated on the only trade route for the Hermus River Valley. All goods from this valley passed into Smyrna’s marketplace and out of its harbor. Over time the city became a major importer and exporter, especially valued for its fine wine and myrrh. In fact, the name Smyrna means “myrrh;” one of the spices presented to Jesus by the Wise Men, and later used to anoint the body of Jesus for burial. As Smyrna grew prosperous, it grew populous. At the time Revelation was written, the city had a population of nearly 150,000; similar to that of Salem, Oregon or Kansas City, Kansas.

And Smyrna was a beautiful city. Beautiful harbor. Beautiful buildings. Beautiful weather thanks to the gentle westerly wind known as the “Zephyr.” A beautiful hill overlooking the city, which residents called the “crown of Smyrna.” And beautiful streets like the Golden Street, which traversed the city from harbor to foothills, and was lined with magnificent temples dedicated to pagan gods: Cybele, Apollo, Asklepios, Aphrodite, and Zeus. Smyrna also had a famous stadium and library, the largest theater in Asia Minor; and claimed to be the birthplace of the renowned Greek poet Homer. It was a proud city; proud enough for the historian Theodor Mommsen to describe it as a “paradise of municipal vanity.”

**Second, the church in Smyrna.** Scripture does not provide the history of the church in Smyrna; who founded it and when. The church may have been founded by the apostle Paul; or members from the congregation at Ephesus; or even converts returning to Asia Minor after the First Pentecost. We simply don’t know.

We do know, however, based on other Christian churches of that era and area

that the church in Smyrna was likely small in number; that it met in humble circumstances—this in stark contrast to the pagan temples adorning the city of Smyrna; and that it was primarily composed of the poor and unlearned, and perhaps even some slaves. As Paul wrote to the church in Corinth: **“Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth,”** 1 Corinthians 1:26.

And, according to the letter of Jesus to the church in Smyrna, Revelations 2:8-11, we also know that this small, unpretentious congregation was suffering. Indeed, notice the language Jesus used in His letter: **“afflictions, poverty, slander, prison, test, persecution, death.”** Imagine if the same terms were used to describe the Christian congregation at 208 11<sup>TH</sup> Street East, Lemmon, SD 57638. People are often attracted to rapidly growing, prosperous mega churches like that of Joel Osteen in Houston, TX; packed pews, big budgets, multiple camera angles. But how many are drawn to small Christian congregations—small and struggling because they care more about preaching truth than packing pews?

Despite its beauty and prosperity, Smyrna was one of the most dangerous cities in Asia Minor for Christians—comparable to starting a Christian church in downtown Baghdad, Iraq or Tehran, Iran. There were two reasons for this. To begin with, Smyrna was extremely devoted to Rome, both in its political affiliation and in its worship of the Roman emperor. Smyrna was actually the first city in the world to build a temple for “Dea Roma,” the patron goddess of Rome. In 26 A.D., Smyrna outbid six other cities for the right to erect a temple for the worship of Emperor Tiberius; a capable leader, but best known for his treason trials, murders, and sexual perversions.

Once a year, residents of Asia Minor were required by law to appear before a Roman magistrate, burn a “pinch of incense” at the altar of Caesar, and proclaim that Caesar was “Dominus et Deus,” their Lord and God. Failure to do so was viewed as treason and punishable by death. At the least, those who refused to worship Caesar were scorned, ostracized, persecuted, and prevented from holding jobs; and especially so in a city like Smyrna. Significantly, the Greek word for **“poverty”** in Revelation 2:9 does not mean “having financial trouble;” it means “having nothing at all; to be destitute and beggarly”—the type of poverty that would result when poor Christians were refused jobs because they were Christians; because they called Jesus “Dominus et Deus,” Lord and God, instead of the Roman emperor.

But there was another reason the Christians in Smyrna were suffering. Jesus

alluded to it in Revelation 2:9, saying, **“I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.”** Smyrna was home to a large number of Jews; and some of these Jews were slandering the Christians in the city. Why? Because they hated Christ. Because they were jealous of the Gospel’s promise and success. Because they wanted to disassociate themselves from Christians—after all, the first Christians were Jews; the apostles were Jews; the Lord Jesus Christ was a Jew. And because they wanted to cause trouble for Christian churches, especially by lying about them to the Roman government and local community.

History has recorded many such slanderous accusations. “Christians are cannibals. They claim to eat the body and blood of Jesus. Christians are perverted. They gather at so-called ‘love feasts.’ Christians are anti-social, anti-tradition, and anti-Roman. This is why they keep to themselves and refuse to attend dinners in honor of the traditional gods.” And so on.

Luke, the writer of Acts, repeatedly recorded how the unbelieving Jews brought trouble, persecution, prison, even riots like the one in Ephesus, to the apostle Paul and his companions. Acts 9:23, **“After many days had gone by, there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him.** Acts 13:45, **“When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy. They began to contradict what Paul was saying and heaped abuse on him.”** Acts 14:2, **“But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the other Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers.”** This mind-poisoning against Christians was happening in Smyrna; and as a result, the Smyrnan Christians were suffering.

**Then third, the content of Christ’s letter to the church in Smyrna.** What comfort did Jesus offer the suffering Christians of Smyrna? How do His words comfort us when we face suffering? Notice first how Jesus introduced Himself in this letter. He said, **“These are the words of Him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again,”** Revelation 2:8.

**“The First and the Last”** Last Sunday, we heard Jesus use these same words in connection with the name **“Alpha and Omega.”** Revelation 1:11, **“I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last.”** We learned how these names for Jesus emphasize His almighty power as the Creator; His eternal nature as true God; His everlasting faithfulness; and His complete sufficiency for every aspect of our lives from “A” to “Z;” from daily bread to eternal life.

And to **“First and Last”** Jesus added the important description: **“who died and came to life again.”** What are these words, if not a precious summary of Christ’s work of redemption; His death for our sins, His resurrection for our justification. As

the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 4:25, **“He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.”** And so from the very first line of His letter to the Smyrnan Christians Jesus reminded them: “I am your eternally faithful God. I have infinite power and infinite love. I love you so much that I died for you sins. My resurrection is the guarantee of your resurrection.” Can you think of a better way to know God when you are suffering or about to suffer?

Several years ago, I was rushed to the ICU of Lakeland Regional Medical Center after a four-hour surgery. I don’t remember much about that gurney ride other than difficulty in breathing; an endless stream of fluorescent lights; and a long hallway lined with baby cribs. But what I do remember are the words that suddenly began to play in my mind: **“The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?”** Psalm 27:1. In my post-operative haze, I did not call these words to mind. The Holy Spirit put them there to assure me that no matter where, no matter when, no matter what, Almighty God was with me. Almighty God loved me. And therefore, I had no reason to be afraid.

In the historical circumstances of Revelation, Jesus was certainly telling the Christians at Smyrna: “Yes, the Roman empire is mighty. But I am the Almighty. Do you think Rome is stronger than I am?” Translate this into our own era and our own increasingly chaotic, dangerous world. The Middle East in flames. Muslim terrorists in Iraq demanding of Christians—a demand no different in essence from the one in Smyrna, “Convert to Islam or die.”

My questions for you are these: Is any nation too strong for the Lord? Is any sickness too strong for the Lord? Is any corrupt politician or troubled marriage or design of Satan too strong for the Lord? Absolutely not. And this is what Jesus was telling the suffering Christians of Smyrna when He said, **“I am the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.”**

Yet, when we suffer, it is not only important to remember God’s infinite strength and redemptive love. It is equally important to remember God’s awareness, understanding, and personal involvement in our suffering. Jesus addressed this very matter in the next line of His letter to Smyrna, saying, **“I know your afflictions and your poverty. I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not,”** Revelation 2:9.

How many of you have seen TV advertisements for “Wounded Warriors;” that is, American soldiers seriously wounded or killed in Iraq or Afghanistan? The images are very moving. In one advertisement, the young wife of a slain soldier says with

tears, “I think the hardest thing was that feeling of being all alone.” A powerful, truthful statement, isn’t it? Worse even than all the suffering is the feeling of being alone. The feeling that no one knows, no one understands, no one cares. No one. Not even God. I won’t ask if you’ve felt this way. I know you have, because I have too. “God isn’t aware of my suffering. God isn’t aware of my illness. God isn’t aware of my troubled relationship or depressing job or unopened bills.

Oh, yes God is. Jesus told us so: “I know,” He said. Jesus pictured it too, when He pictured Himself in Revelation as walking in the very middle of each Christian congregation. And Jesus proved it so when He shared in our humanity; carried our sins and sicknesses and sorrows; and suffered in our place on the cross.

In His letter to Smyrna, Jesus reminded His suffering Christians that He not only knew the tribulations and circumstances that opposed them, but that He even knew the slanderous words—the accusations, the unkind remarks, the unfair criticisms—spoken against them. This is how involved Jesus was in their lives and in their church. This is how involved Jesus is in our lives and in our church.

And then, Jesus provided the sufferings Christians of Smyrna with the prospect of—of what? More suffering. In this He minced no words. **“Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution ten days,”** Revelation 2:10. Consider this. Today many churches teach a so-called “prosperity gospel.” According to this teaching, once people come to Jesus they will cease to experience problems and become fabulously wealthy.

Of course, Jesus never taught such nonsense. Jesus never said that following Him would eliminate all problems; rather, that following Him would bring an entirely new set of problems—ridicule, persecution, prison, even death. In fact, He told his disciples, “A time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God,” John 16:2. And the Smyrnan Christians knew this from personal experience. God forbid; but one day, judging from growing opposition to Christianity around the world and in our own country, we may know this from personal experience too.

Jesus was a realist. Jesus refused to hide the reality of suffering from Christian churches or Christian individuals. This, in fact, was one reason why the **“revelation of Jesus Christ”** was given; namely, **“to show His servants what must soon take place,”** Revelation 1:1. And the reality is, as Jesus said in John 16:33, **“In this world you will have trouble.”** But He quickly added, **“But take heart! I have overcome the world.”**

And it is in His victory that we obtain our victory. It is in His overcoming that we become overcomers. How do we overcome suffering? JESUS. How do we overcome temptation? JESUS. How do we overcome the world? JESUS. How do we overcome disappointment? JESUS.

Did you know the word “overcome” is used more than fifteen times in Revelation? Did you know that the call to overcome is at the conclusion of each letter to each of the seven churches in Asia Minor. There isn’t much doubt about the theme of Revelation, is there—or what Jesus Christ wants for your life? Victory. Overcoming.

And this is the promise with which Jesus closed His letter to the suffering Christians of Smyrna: **“Be faithful, even to the point of 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 will not be hurt by the second death,”** Revelation 2:10-11.

If you’re suffering, consider the comfort Jesus provided in His letter to Smyrna. He said: “Don’t be afraid of suffering. I am almighty and My power is at work in your life. Don’t be afraid of suffering. I am always faithful, always present, and always loving. Don’t be afraid of suffering. I have proven My love for you by dying on the cross and rising from the dead. Don’t be afraid of suffering. I know how you feel. I know what you’re going through. I know when people mistreat you and slander you. You will suffer from time to time. But your suffering is under My control, and will end in your victory. Trust in Me, and you will receive the crown of life.”

What a letter. Have you checked your spiritual mailbox recently? There is a letter, this letter, waiting for you from Jesus Christ.