

We are examining Jesus messages to the seven churches of Asia in Rev. 2-3. Last week we looked at the message to the church at Ephesus. If you'll remember, they were doing great things, standing in the face of persecution and doctrinally sound, but they had drifted away from a passionate love for Christ. They had become religious. Jesus reminded them to do the things they did at first to restore their passion for God. That was our challenge as well.

Today we look at the church at Smyrna. *(next week we'll pick-up the pace a bit).*

To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. Rev. 2:8

Smyrna was a beautiful city located on the coast about 40 miles north of Ephesus. It was one of the most prosperous cities of Asia. The city was a major centers of emperor worship. Smyrna had won the right in 26AD to erect a temple to the emperor Caesar Tiberius.

The Christians of Smyrna were confronted with the need annually to choose between saying, "Jesus is Lord," or, "Caesar is Lord." That was the test the Romans applied to all their citizens. It meant that a great deal of pressure and persecution came upon this church.

Jesus starts by telling them He is in control and ruler over everything. For a people being persecuted this is important to thing in which they need to be reminded. He is also relating to their persecution by His own example of suffering to the point of death.

Sometimes we can only be consoled or we seek out people who have been through what we are experiencing. When Ryan & Barb Stroud found out they were having twins we connected them with our elders, Kent and Kari Mueller because their first children were twins. Another reason why mentoring is so important and why we continually try to get people connected through Life Groups and one-to-one relationships.

"I know your afflictions..." Rev. 2:9. Jesus understood there afflictions. The word "afflictions" comes from a Greek word meaning, "to push down upon to the point of crushing." The name Smyrna means "myrrh." It is a very fitting name because myrrh is a perfume, the fragrance of which is released by crushing.

Another word we might use today is oppression or even genocide.

Throughout history people have died for the beliefs whether they be political, social or religious. We have watched genocide taking place in our generation in places like the former Soviet Union, Africa, and parts of Asia. Today the battle lines are not just tribal

and isolated they are being drawn around the world between Christianity and Islam. Radical Muslim factions have determined they can force their religious view on the world.

In that day the issue was over who was going to be worshipped. There could only be one lord in the lives of the people of the Roman Empire. Each year people had to pass the bust of Caesar and declare Caesar is lord. Of course, the Christians could not do this so they were considered enemies of the state or traitors. If most governments that are anti-religion or anti-Christian could see through their blindness they would want their citizens to follow Christ. They would be a people who are dedicated to integrity, working under God, serving others, joyful, family oriented and so forth.

Jesus also said, ***"I know your poverty."*** Poverty goes along with people being oppressed.

Christian business owners would not have been patronized or given higher paying jobs. A second reason for their poverty was probably their Christ-like quality of sharing their resources with others in need. Again, these people were not living for this world.

You... joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. Heb. 10:34

Life and suffering and pain in this world will never be understood or make any sense until we grasp this idea that was at the very center of these believer's lives. They were part of God's kingdom, they were dwelled in this world but were citizens of an eternal kingdom. We need to grasp this as our view of life as well.

"yet you are rich." Jesus again reminds us that the values of God's kingdom are not only different from the world in which we live, sometimes the complete opposite. They had a richness of relationship with Christ and one another that outsiders could never experience and that's why even in the midst of being persecuted they grew.

"I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan." They were not only persecuted by the Romans but also by the Jews. They were being slandered and accused of all kinds of immoral and subversive activity.

Called ***"synagogue of Satan"*** because Satan means ***"slanderer or accuser"***. This is his very nature to condemn and slander us. This is what they were doing in the name of God.

"Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer" Jesus could speak a word and protect them or destroy their attackers, instead He prepares them for suffering. This does not fit in with our Americanized Gospel of comfort and prosperity. Wouldn't you rather hear a message on how to avoid suffering? One way you can avoid suffering is compromise. Just give in to temptation and then you won't suffer.

Jesus said, ***"In this life you will have tribulation."***

There must be something beneficial in suffering or else God would not allow it. Maybe it's the fact that when we give up so much and feel pain or injustice we draw closer to God to find comfort, maybe we value others more, and look forward to eternity rather than the next thing we are going to buy to make ourselves happy.

Maybe it's what Paul described as an expert on suffering.

"This light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us to produce an eternal weight of glory," 2 Corinthians 4:17

Jesus says three very encouraging things to strengthen the people of Smyrna. These are timeless principles that apply to us today as well.

First, ***"You are going to be put into prison to test you."*** We don't like tests. Some people do test themselves through extreme sports, running a marathon, or even sitting on the couch pursuing the high score in a video game. We all want to know how we are doing. The only way to know if we are making progress in an area is to be tested. What determines our attitude toward a test is whether or not we think we're prepared.

Second, he says it will be only for a limited time. He is going to test you ***"ten days."*** Thankfully God not only gives us the grace through His Holy Spirit dwelling in us to endure any situation, but He assigns a limit to the time.

We may affect the timeframe by learning what we can through the testing and growing from it.

I have seen people deal with the same issue year after year because they never really got what God is wanting them to do, or lay down, or forgive, or whatever. These people amaze me in that they know why they are still in this place. They have become comfortable and they've accommodated their lives and are content to stay there.

Third, Jesus says, ***"Be faithful even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life."***

There has to be a perspective of a "higher purpose" or "greater good" for us to endure suffering. If it seems meaningless then what is the point. Why go on suffering. We give up and give in to depression, bitterness, and actually add to our own destruction.

These early believers had a right perspective. A few years after this letter on Feb. 2, 156 they came to arrest and execute Polycarp the leader of the church of Smyrna. When his captors came he invited them in and offered them food and a place to sleep overnight. They pleaded with him, "what harm can it do to offer a simple sacrifice to the emperor?" When he arrived to the amphitheatre for his trial and execution the proconsul said, "Respect your years!...Swear by the genius of Caesar and I will release you; revile Christ!"

Polycarp responded, "For 86 years I have served Him, and he has done me no wrong; how then can I blaspheme my king who saved me?"

They brought him to the stake to be burned and he refused to be tied. He felt the grace of God would cause him to stand and endure the flames in identify with Christ's suffering.

The 20th century produced more Christian martyrs than during the time of the Roman persecutions. In nations around the world people are being persecuted and martyred because they refuse to bow their knee to any other God but Jesus Christ.

Make no mistake, we are called to suffer. Your suffering will probably not be in the form of choosing death over denying Christ. It is more likely to come from suffering when we don't give into our sinful cravings and desires. We suffer when we sacrifice to give to others. We suffer when we offer our time and abilities for God's kingdom rather than just for ourselves.

Hebrews says, "***Jesus suffered when he was tempted.***" He suffered by not giving in. ***Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.*** Heb. 2:18

But here is the promise...

"He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death." Rev. 2:11

Chapters 20 and 21 of this book of Revelation make three references to the "second death." There we are told about the lake of fire, the symbol of the final judgment of those who refuse the grace of God. It is prepared for the devil and his angels. God never intended it for those who reject Him but this will be their choice.