

Smyrna (present-day Izmir, Turkey) was a harbour city in Asia Minor, which had the luxury of a harbour within a protected gulf. The city destroyed in 580 B.C. was rebuilt in 290 B.C., and was one of the very few cities built according to a plan. Many ancient writers comment on her beauty. As a harbour town, she was a center for trade. She was also a center for the worship of Rome, and a temple was built there in 195 B.C., and then later a temple was built for Emperor Tiberius in A.D. 26. She boasted a large and affluent Jewish population known for the persecution and slander of the Christian church there. The church in Smyrna was certainly a church that knew tribulation. They suffered poverty and persecution for the faith, to be sure. But it was the will of the King to place a lampstand there. Though we do not know when this church was started, Christ called her to shine in that place of darkness. Let's Take a look at Christ as He reveals Himself to the churches via Smyrna

***These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.***

The Spirit teaches us that Christ, under God, determines history and reality. What we think is happening and happening are not the same things, and we can only see doom and gloom. Seemingly, everything is going superbly, and then reality settles in. He is the sovereign one who addresses us this morning. To those suffering not only Smyrna but in the church everywhere and in all times, the comforting truth of predestination is laid before us.

Many will tell you that if predestination is the truth, we have no liberty of freedom of the will or reason to make choices. But the message of Jesus is just the opposite because predestination is not the loss of freedom but the meaningfulness of life. If Jesus does not appoint things, then we suffer for nothing. But as the soldiers of Christ's army, we suffer for the glory of God and the victory of the Kingdom. The King-Priest will address His people: they must listen and obey:

### **The Lord Jesus Calls the Church in Smyrna to Stand Up for Him**

#### **1. Persevere in Poverty and Persecution 2. Persevere in the Precious Promises**

Persevere in Poverty: Jesus, who is the first and the last and the one who died and lived again, says, ***I know your afflictions and your poverty--yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not but are a synagogue of Satan.***

I wonder how these Christians in Smyrna must have felt. First, you hear about Ephesus, and though all looks well, there is a definite lack. They are asked to repent and get back to their first love and worship God in the name of Jesus by loving God and one another. Yes, the church was stressed and in tribulation in Ephesus, and the churches were in that together, and so was John on Patmos. But they are not asked to suffer even more. But the church in Smyrna hears Jesus say that He knows that they are suffering and will have to suffer more! What a thing to hear? What of you this morning? What do you think about that? Are those words for us too? Can we relate? Do we need to?

First, let us find hope in the fact that Jesus knows that the church is suffering. When the church suffers, Jesus suffers: He knows about that suffering! He is the first and last who died and came to life again. Jesus is the Son of God who became the man of sorrows. He came to earth to suffer, and when He asked that the cup of God's wrath might pass from Him, He submitted to the Father's will. Jesus knows about suffering. He is the King of Kings, who is also the great High Priest. When He says that He knows our suffering, it is much more than saying that He is aware that we are suffering; He intimately knows what the suffering they are going through. As He got through it, He will be with them and get them through it.

The church in Smyrna was likely under financial oppression, and the members refused work or were ostracized in business affairs due to Jewish hostility. It is difficult to know whether the first converts were already poor or some well-off lost their wealth. It is a combination of both. Look, Smyrna was known for its wealth, ornate buildings, and luxury. It was a place that did not tolerate any intolerance of Greek culture, and it certainly did not tolerate any who did not worship Caesar—except the Jewish community. The Jewish community was not interested in giving up their freedom to do business protected by law. So, they pretending to be faithful slandered the genuinely faithful. They were the synagogue of Satan and made it utterly impossible for Christians who confess Jesus as Lord and are intolerant of worldly culture to earn a decent living. In

Revelation 13:15, we read of the mark of the beast that was needed to buy or sell. Well, the people in Smyrna knew what that was like. The church was poor, and her members lived in abject poverty. Jesus does not promise that this will get better. He encourages them: they possess all.

I can hear Karl Marx now—religion is the opium of the people. He believed that religion was an invention to keep the poor down. Suffer and now and get your reward later. But Jesus does not say; you will be rich—you are rich. I think of James 1:2-3: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance." Peter also calls us to rejoice in the hope of salvation while we suffer for a while, for we are receiving the end of our faith. Hebrews 11 teaches us about the suffering of the Old Testament faithful, and in chapter 12, we read of how the Father is disciplining that we may obtain glory. We are rich now because it is working with us now, says Christ to the church. We are rich because we possess Him, Jesus, who is the first and the last. As Paul wrote: II Corinthians 6:4 and 10b: Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships, and distresses; ...**poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and possessing everything.** And Jesus said, **but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.** (Matthew 6:20-21)

Jesus had no place to lay His head, was dependent on the giving of others, came into the world and was laid in a manger. Jesus knows what life all is about. Life is easier when you have money, but does wealth or security make us better? Are we convinced that suffering may be a good and needed thing? I do not know what the future holds, but it is getting more challenging to be a Christian doctor or nurse, politician and it seems the circle of wealth is being closed to us. But if that is what we need and if we lose all of our wealth and security for Christ but still have Christ, we are blessed indeed. We are blessed indeed if we are the poor who inherit the earth. Sorry Mr. Marx, as per usual, you are wrong again. With the people of Smyrna, let us remain steadfast and strong and persevere even in economic persecution. If poverty comes, let us still be willing and joyful soldiers of the cross! Christ will help us!

Recall that Jesus speaks to them as the King-Priest who has himself undergone suffering and is now all glorious! He says, **do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you; the devil will put some of you in prison to evaluate you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days.**

Who are the folks who brought the false charges? It was the people of the covenant—namely the Jews. John wrote that Jesus came to His Own, and they did not receive Him. They cried out; we have no king but Caesar: and crucified Jesus. Now they were doing the same things to Christians in Smyrna. They were bringing false charges to the Roman officials. In their business dealings and social contacts, they smeared Christians' names as seditious troublemakers. Rome did not first hound Christians but the synagogues—read Acts. The tribulation that came was that the Old Covenant people broke the covenant joined with the world, and we see the truth of Revelation 12 being played out where the serpent, Satan, is coming after the church. They will suffer, go to prison, and even must die for the sake of Christ. John knew that suffering, and so did Jesus.

Jesus is not going to make it go away. Ten days does mean that there will be an end to it. But suffering and cross-bearing are the future for the church in Smyrna. What a message to hear! Jesus will leave those not of the world in the world. Without Him, they cannot persevere, and they cannot stand. That King now clarifies that the Christians are the children of God, and the hostile Jews are not!

The King tells the suffering ones that more suffering will come. In that way, too, the light will shine in the darkness. Christ calls them to their richness in covenant and the better prize of the Kingdom of God inheritance. Though suffering comes, these things will be taken from them! But Christ has defeated Satan! Ten days is symbolic of the limit of their suffering, which means a limit is set: Remember, ten days was the testing time for Daniel and his friends. (Daniel 1:12-15)

We can imagine that there must have been a worry for the persecution and coming tribulation, but the ten days will turn into a thousand years of rest! The sense here is that they will

be preserved, and thus, persevere through these tests of poverty and persecution and if we must travel this road, so too will we. What a message of hope to the thousands of suffering and oppressed people of God worldwide! Christ will hold us fast; let us hold fast to Him. That brings us to our second point:

**Persevere in the Precious Promises** The light will shine: Jesus commands: **Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.** How can we face this? How could they? How do you come home from church after this sermon? We must trust the promises of God! Again, we recall James' words: **Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.** (James 1:12). And Paul wrote, (II Timothy 4:6-8): **For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day--and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.**

The persecuted church comes to know Jesus as the persecuted one who knows their suffering and to see Jesus in His triumph. Revelation is not to produce pessimism but a hopeful optimism rooted in the work and authority of King Jesus. The glories of Greece, Jerusalem and Rome are long gone—the Kingdom of Jesus still stands. Those who suffer tribulation stand in the glorious presence of Jesus even now, and the church still stands! The persecuted church receives the covenant blessing: **Walk with me, and I will walk with you!** The persecuted church is the covenant people, and to them, Jesus speaks and gives these promises. In this context, they are to be faithful: suffering will be intense and then finished!

**He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.** The first death is the separation of body and soul, and the second death is the eternal separation from God. If you die in Jesus Christ, you will live in the glory of His Kingdom, full body and soul restored unto eternity. If Jesus Christ is not your Lord and Savior, then the second death waits for you—eternal hell, the lake of fire, the place of weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth where the fire does not burn out or the worm ever die. Jesus gives you what you want- eternal life without Him. Still, life with Him means suffering! But look at the glory that waits for you. Hold on to that prize and that hope and forth in courage and strength. Lead on O King eternal; we follow not with fear! For yours are the Kingdom, power and the glory! Do you believe? O Lord, help our unbelief.

When trouble hits, oppression comes, and persecution starts, Satan consistently works on our hearts to wonder what we did wrong or why God is angry with us. If we are suffering because of our sin, then repent. But I have known this kind of suffering and gave in to the temptation. How could godly people or the people of God attack or hurt? And so, I doubted God. I needed to see that this was my lot and that I was being blessed and a blessing in my suffering. It was a hard lesson that took too long to learn. It is an awkward thing to consider suffering for Jesus pure joy. But we know that tribulation causes perseverance, and perseverance, hope and hope never disappoints us. But be the first and the last, the very lasting one who suffered died and lives again. **"Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." "Yes," says the Spirit, "they will rest from their labour, for their deeds will follow them."** (Revelation 14:13) and Revelation 20:6: **Blessed and holy are those who have a part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.**

The message is for the persecuted church of all times and places. Yet the intense suffering of the covenant people at the hands of the covenant breakers must not be forgotten. Christ is King of Kings and Lord of the church for the church! In Christ, we have hope and comfort!

**Conclusion** I want to leave you then with the account of Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, who lived out this prophecy. The church tradition tells us that John ordained him, and he stood up to the growing Greek pagan influences on Christianity. The exact charge against him is unknown, but at 86 years old, he waited for the Roman soldiers in his home. Roman soldiers eventually

discovered Polycarp's whereabouts and came to his door. When his friends urged him to run, Polycarp replied, "God's will be done," and he let in the soldiers.

He was escorted to the local proconsul, Statius Quadratus, who interrogated him in front of a crowd of curious onlookers. Polycarp seemed unfazed by the interrogation; he carried on a witty dialogue with Quadratus until Quadratus lost his temper and threatened Polycarp: he'd be thrown to wild beasts, he'd be burned at the stake, and so on. Polycarp just told Quadratus that while the proconsul's fire lasts but a little while, the fires of judgment ("reserved for the ungodly," he slyly added) cannot be quenched. Polycarp concluded, "But why do you delay? Come, do what you will." After continuous threats and oppression to denounce Jesus as Lord, Polycarp answered, "86 years have I have served him, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?"

Soldiers then grabbed him to nail him to a stake, but Polycarp stopped them: "Leave me as I am. For he who grants me to endure the fire will enable me also to remain on the pyre unmoved, without the security you desire from nails." He prayed aloud, the fire was lit, and his flesh was consumed. The chronicler of this martyrdom said it was "not as burning flesh but as bread baking or as gold and silver refined in a furnace." The account of his death concludes by saying that Polycarp's death was remembered by "everyone"—"he is even spoken of by the heathen in every place."

The devil means it for glory, but the Lord uses it for His good and the glory of His Kingdom. I can imagine these were difficult words to hear at. First, the Christians in Smyrna would suffer, but they were called to put their hope in God. Let's finish with these words from Psalm 42: ***My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me, saying to me all day long, "Where is your God?" Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.*** Amen.