

Sermon – 03/12/2006 am

The Church at Smyrna

Study Text: Revelation 2:8-11

Along with Daniel, three young men were carried off as prisoners to the city of Babylon. King Nebuchadnezzar was the powerful ruler over the vast Babylonian empire. One day he made an enormous golden statue of himself and decreed that every person in his empire must fall down and worship this image. Anyone who failed to do so would immediately be thrown into a burning fiery furnace (Daniel 3:6). Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego were arrested and brought before the king for refusing to worship this gold image. They said ‘our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace...and he will deliver us from your hand O king, but if not let it be known O king, that we do not serve your gods nor will we worship the gold image you have set up (Daniel 3:17 -18).

Suffering

Christians in Smyrna in the first century were suffering the same sort of trials as these young men. They were still suffering in the second century. Polycarp was a young man in this church when John wrote. He later became the leader of the church and in the year 155 died as a martyr in Smyrna. When commanded by the Proconsul to worship Caesar, Polycarp refused saying ‘how can I blaspheme my king who saved me’. A mob consisting of both heathens and Jews railed against him for being an atheist, one who did not worship any idol nor offer sacrifices.

Smyrna was a beautiful port city like Ephesus with temples to numerous gods including one to the goddess of Rome. This city was a great supporter of Roman power and in 26BC was given the honour of having a temple to the Emperor Tiberius. The people of Smyrna, except for the Christians (2:9), were very prosperous. Becoming a Christian in this city probably meant losing your job, and having your possessions confiscated. For some it would mean being thrown into prison and even death (2:10).

They were poor in worldly terms, but were rich in heavenly terms. *I know your affliction and poverty – but you are rich* said the Lord (2:9). Their earthly inheritance may be taken away from them, but their heavenly inheritance could never be taken from them (Matthew 6:20). They may be confined to prison but their true freedom, their freedom in Christ, can never be taken from them. In Jesus Christ we are set free from sin and death, a freedom the world does not understand.

The message to the church at Smyrna contained only commendation – there is no condemnation in this message. This commendation came from *the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life* (2:8). Apparently this city was once destroyed and lay in ruins for 300 years before being rebuilt. It rose from the ashes as it were.

Jesus Christ was crucified and was buried. But he rose from the dead. He was dead but came to life. Having conquered death he now lives – he is alive for evermore (1:18). Such a message brought comfort and hope to the church at Smyrna. It was not a message about avoiding persecution or even death, but about enduring and receiving the crown of life.

How many preaches proclaim such a message today? How many people would continue coming to large churches in our city if they were told that life as a Christian will be tough? 'If you are having a hard time now, if you are struggling financially then rejoice, for things are going to get better? – no worse!' 'If you feel lonely and that no one loves you rejoice for soon you will have lots of friends? – no, you may be in prison!' How would such a message be received in churches today?

Do not fear the things you are about to suffer (2:10). This was the message for the church at Smyrna. It is a message some churches in the world today do understand, but not in our city. Let those who have ears to hear, hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Synagogue of Satan

What would be the source of this suffering? Who was going to lead the attack against the church at Smyrna? The pagans despised the Christians as atheists for they did not worship any idol or visible God. They simply celebrated the Lord's Supper which was a strange practice to the pagans. I remember a new Christian telling me how the Hindus, who are vegetarians, asked her was it meat that she had to eat when she went forward to the table.

But it was the Jews, or so called Jews, who were leading the attack against Christians. They were slandering or accusing them before the authorities with religious zeal. This was nothing new of course. The Jews kept on accusing Jesus. The Jews hounded the apostle Paul out of almost every city he visited, from Lystra across to Berea (Acts 14, 17). They were still pursuing Christians and having them thrown into prison 40 years later, and 100 years later. Has their attitude to Christians changed after 2000 years?

The church at Smyrna would have started in the synagogue. When some Jews heard that in Jesus of Nazareth all the promises of God were fulfilled, they believed in him. But others refused to believe and threw them out of the synagogue. They pursued them wherever they went seeking to have them thrown into prison.

They say they are Jews but are not, but are a synagogue of Satan (2:9). These were not true Jews. They were not true children of Abraham. They were in fact children of the devil as had Jesus called them previously – 'liars and murderers just like your father the devil' (John 8:44). These words seem unduly harsh, but they are the words of Jesus. Jews who opposed him and refused to believe in him were not true Jews but agents of Satan.

God promised Abraham *I will bless those who bless you and I will curse those who curse you* (Genesis 12). Abraham is the father of all who believe in Jesus (Romans 4). According to this promise those who curse Abraham and his children will be cursed by God. They will be called children of Satan.

Is this promise still valid or are Jews to be seen as faithful followers of the true God? Why is it that today Christians (so called) are joining with Jews (so called) in seeking the restoration of the earthly Jerusalem and its temple? How can a church of Christ be working with, and worshipping with, the synagogue of Satan? Hendriksen writes 'How anyone can say that the Jews of today are still in a very special, and glorious and pre-eminent sense God's people is more than we can understand. God himself calls those who reject the Saviour and persecute true believers, the *synagogue of Satan*. They are no longer his people'.

Second Death

The Jews were in league with the Romans in persecuting the Christians at Smyrna. Together they were in league with the devil; both were agents of Satan, the adversary and enemy of God and his people. The devil would soon put some of these believers into prison. The Lord would allow them to be tested in this way. The testing of your faith produces patience, leading to maturity and fullness (James 1:3).

Remember how the Lord allowed Job to be tested. All his possessions were destroyed and all his family taken from him. He suffered painful boils all over his body. Did he curse God, or did he remain faithful? The believers at Smyrna were about to be tested. They were exhorted to be faithful to the very end, even unto death.

Their faithfulness would be rewarded. They were promised three things in this message from the Lord. **Firstly**, Satan would not be given unlimited power. The testing would be for a precise period of time. ‘Ten days’ is not to be taken literally. This round number refers to a short period but full period – a short season. ‘An eleventh day would soon come’ as one commentator put it.

Paul told the Corinthians that God is faithful and they would not be tested beyond what they were able to bear (I Corinthians 10). God would provide a way out in due time. No testing is pleasant at the time and sometimes we think it will never end. We feel like giving up. To be assured that it is but for a little while, and that the end is near, encourages us to press on.

Secondly, those who were faithful until death were promised the *crown of life* by the risen Jesus (2:10). This crown is promised to all who love the Lord and endure testing (James 1:12). As the apostle Paul finished the race, having kept the faith, he knew that a crown of righteousness awaited him (I Timothy 4:8). The crown spoken of here was not a royal crown, not a crown inherited by birth, but the crown of an athlete who was victorious in the games. The crown of life will be given by Jesus, the one who himself ran the race and won the victory for us.

Thirdly, the faithful believers at Smyrna were told they would *not be hurt by the second death* (2:11). The second death refers to being cast into the lake of fire, another name for Hell (20:14). This is the place of everlasting punishment and torment. Those whose names are written in the book of life escape the second death (20:15). When the spiritually dead hear the voice of Jesus they live. They are born again. They will die at the end of this present life but not again at the Judgment. Those born again of the Spirit of God have eternal life and enter heaven directly – they will not face the second death.

Members of the church at Smyrna had a choice. They could resist the devil and be faithful to Jesus despite the suffering, or they could compromise their faith and escape the present suffering. You have the same choice. And you will face the same outcome. If you are faithful you will receive the crown of life and avoid the second death. If you compromise with the world, and deny Jesus, you will not escape the second death. This is the word of *the First and the Last, who was dead and came to life*.

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