

“THE CHURCH IN SMYRNA.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Revelation 2:8-11

Introduction

On this second Sunday of November each year the church around the world remembers our brothers and sisters in Christ who are being persecuted for their faith.

Christians in more than 60 nations are under direct threat from their government or militant groups in their countries, and in another 60 countries Christians experience some form of harassment. Christians today are one of the most persecuted religious groups in the world. There is a global war being waged against Christianity.

Topping the list of countries are North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran, Afghanistan, Somalia, Indonesia. Half the Christians in Iraq have fled in the past 8 years. They are fleeing Syria daily as they are being chased from their homes.

For 12 years straight North Korea is the worst nation in the world for tyrannical oppression of Christianity. Just to possess a Bible means execution as does any contact with Christians outside of the nation. As we have seen even suspicious activity by tourists can lead to imprisonment.

Believers in many parts of our world pay a heavy price for their faith. Discrimination in education and in employment and housing, beatings, physical torture, isolation, rape, slavery, imprisonment, and even death are just few examples they experience on the daily basis.

Just this past week a Christian couple in Pakistan was brutally killed because they were Christians.

The author of Hebrews speaks of these believers as people of whom the world is not worthy.

We pampered American Evangelicals have been living a dream for a while. But the normal experience of Christians in history is to suffer for what they believe. We are not entering into a strange time of history, but a more normal one (see II Timothy 3:12; 1 Pet. 4.12).

It is almost impossible for us here to imagine how people can suffer so much and yet remain faithful to the very end.

The terrible persecution of the followers of Jesus all over the world is a testimony to the worth of Jesus. He is better than life itself. This was the testimony of the church in Smyrna.

Revelation 2:8-11, The Letter to the Church in Smyrna. Smyrna: The City of Life.

The letter to the church in Smyrna is full of praise, not based on good times or ease but endurance in persecution and overcoming in hardship.

Because the history and character of each city figures prominently in the content of each letter allow me to give a brief background of Smyrna.

Smyrna is about 35 miles north of Ephesus on western coast of Turkey on the Aegean Sea. Smyrna began as a Greek colony around 1000BC built on a strategic port that served as the beginning of a great trade route into Asia Minor. It was built on a hill that gently sloped down to the sea. The rounded top of the hill Pagos was called the crown of Smyrna.

In 700BC the city was destroyed and lay in ruins for three centuries. It was then restored, raised from the dead. Smyrna was dead and then lived. At the time of Jesus Smyrna was nearly 100,000 in population. Today it is Izmir, Turkey, the third largest city in Turkey with a population of over four million.

In the time of the Roman Empire it was well-known for being a loyal and faithful ally. Faithfulness was one of this cities virtues in Roman history.

The church in Smyrna was probably founded by Paul on his third missionary journey in 53-56AD.

Christ's Character Identified with the Church, vs. 8.

Remember we also said that the description of Christ that introduces each letter is specifically relevant to that city and the content of their letter.

Jesus is the first and the last. He is the Alpha and the Omega. Jesus is God.

Jesus was dead and yet lived. The author like the city was dead and lived. To those facing death Jesus' victory over death is a great encouragement.

Jesus speaks from experience as He encourages the church in Smyrna to preserve under persecution and under the threat of martyrdom.

Christ is saying that as one who suffered persecution and was killed and yet lives, He has authority to say that if you too suffer and are being persecuted, if you too are martyred, if you remain faithful even to death, I will give you the crown of life. You will live again.

When you think about your own death are you able to allay your fears in the knowledge of Jesus victory over death. Jesus is bigger than death, He has conquered Satan.

This description of Jesus was meant to give Christians then courage, and this description is meant to give Christians today courage.

Christ's Commendation, vs. 9.

Christ's commendation of Smyrna is the most positive of any church except Philadelphia. And like Philadelphia, these are the only two churches to receive no call to repentance.

They are undergoing severe testing and trial through persecution and they desperately need a word from the Lord. Jesus assures them and comforts them that He is very mindful of their situation and suffering, He knows intimately what they are going through, their tribulation, their poverty, their opposition.

Jesus is bluntly honest. The devil is at work but God is using Satan and the Jews to accomplish His own purposes. He calls the synagogue the synagogue of Satan.

The synagogue of Satan.

The Christians may have been hated because they were Jewish converts, betrayers. So the Jews spoke against the Christians and brought accusations against them before Roman tribunals.

While they might think they belonged to the synagogue of God, Jesus said they were part of the synagogue of Satan because they rejected the Messiah and persecuted those who believe in the Messiah. Racially they were God's people, but in reality they were not.

By rejecting their Messiah, the Jews cut themselves off from the covenant made with Abraham.

John 16:2-4 They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. 3 And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me. 4 But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you.

Christ's Challenge and Promise, vss. 10-11.

2:10-11 Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. 11 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.'

Jesus says I know you and I know what you are going through. I see the injustice of what you are experiencing. At this point you would hope to hear that Jesus is coming with His angels to

deliver you, He has heard your cry and He is about to rain down justice on those who are causing you all your suffering.

Instead Jesus says it's going to get worse. You are in the midst of poverty and persecution, and prison and death await you.

Imprisonment here isn't what we think of, languishing in a jail for months or years. The Romans wouldn't be burdened with the custody of criminals. This imprisonment was only for as long as they stood trial and could be executed.

To this Jesus says fear not, be faithful.

Just as the city of Smyrna prided herself on her faithful loyalty to Rome, so the Smyrnan Christians must remain faithful to Christ. Faithful was the chief glory of the city of Smyrna and the chief glory of the church of Smyrna.

Satan is strong, on earth is not his equal, but behind Satan is God controlling everything he does. God always puts limits and restraints on Satan, this far and no more, which is the meaning of the phrase ten days.

Ten days.

Like many of the numbers in Revelation this should be read symbolically rather than literally. If ten days were to be taken literally then this trial is nothing. But the ten days means an undefined but definite and relatively brief period of time. It is not permanent.

Yes the suffering is certain, it will come, but remember it is also very limited and Jesus knows the number. It will come and then on the "eleventh" day it will be over.

God doesn't keep us from the trials, but He promises the trials will end and after them there will be a crown. There has to be a cross, but after the cross comes the crown of glory.

This promise had special significance in this city. Mt. Pagos was called the crown of Smyrna, and the goddess Cybele was pictured on their coins wearing a crown. Over these illusions Jesus offers a true crown of life, there would not be a second death.

Romans 8:18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

Conclusion.

I want to conclude with two stories, one old and one new.

Polycarp of Smyrna.

One of the early church fathers was Polycarp who was Bishop of the church of Smyrna around the years AD 155-160. He was an old man, probably the last disciple of an apostle, the Apostle John. Early Christians were hated by the Roman government and there were many who were killed in Smyrna. Polycarp was arrested and charged with being a Christian.

The Roman Proconsul urged him to save his life, “Swear, reproach against Christ, and I will set you free.” Polycarp declared “86 years have I have served him and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?”

And the Pro-Consul said: “I have wild beasts. I will deliver you to them, unless you repent.” And he said: “Call for them, for repentance from better to worse is not allowed us; but it is good to change from evil to righteousness.” And he said again to him: “I will cause you to be consumed by fire, if you despise the beasts, unless you repent.” But Polycarp said: “You threaten with the fire that burns for a time, and is quickly quenched, for you do not know the fire which awaits the wicked in the judgment to come and in everlasting punishment. But why are you waiting? Come, do what you will.”

Jews helped bring wood for the fire to burn Polycarp. Polycarp’s testimony was heard by many and many followed his example. And the church remained faithful. In fact of the seven cities of Revelation this may be the only one that still has a church and Christians living in it. The oldest church in Izmir today is St. Polycarp Church.

Illustration and story from John Piper:

“A dad was reading the Bible to his daughter during family devotions and they read this text from Revelation 2:10. The dad asked his daughter, “Who is stronger Jesus or Satan?” “Jesus is stronger.” “That’s right. So all Jesus has to do is say to the devil, “You shall not throw my loved ones into prison,” and the devil will not be able to do it. Right? Right.

So, why does Jesus let the devil do this? Why does he let the devil throw his precious followers in jail and even kill some of them? She shook her head. I said, well, let’s read it again slowly, and you tell me the reason that the Bible gives. “Behold the devil is about to throw some of you into prison ... that ... you ... may ... be ... tested.” So why does Jesus let this happen? “That they may be tested.” That’s right.

And what is being tested? What does passing the test look like? He says, “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.” Faithfulness to Jesus is being tested. Will his loved ones keep trusting him? Will they keep believing that he has their best interest at heart? That he is good? That he is stronger than all? Passing the test means loving God to the end.

So, there is always one thing you can know God is doing when pain comes into your life. This is something you can settle with God ahead of time. He is always testing you. If the test leads

to your death, as it did for some of the Christians in Smyrna, Jesus wants you to know something ahead of time. “You will receive the crown of life.”

So even if the devil is causing it, as he did in Smyrna, Jesus is letting it happen. And he always has his reasons—more than we can know. One of those reasons is always testing, namely, the testing of our faith and our love for him.”

The challenge is to persevere, to persistently endure and be faithful to the end. And if the end is death know that the promise stands. You will not be hurt by the second death but will receive the crown of life from your Savior Jesus.

Jesus is worth dying for, Jesus is worth living for. To the faithful, they shall see Him face to face and share His glory and receive His crown of eternal life.

Polycarp’s Prayer:

Lord God Almighty, Father of Thy beloved and blessed Son, Jesus Christ, through whom we have received the grace of knowing Thee, God of angels and powers, and the whole creation, and of the whole race of the righteous who live in Thy presence; I bless Thee for deigning me worthy of this day and this hour that I may be among Thy martyrs and drink of the cup of my Lord Jesus Christ ... I praise Thee for all Thy mercies; I bless Thee, I glorify Thee, through the eternal High Priest, Jesus Christ, Thy beloved Son, with whom to Thyself and the Holy Spirit, be glory both now and forever. Amen.