

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, 2-3-13 PM NOTES  
"THE SUFFERING CHURCH"  
REVELATION 2:8-11  
#4 in Series, "Verse-by-Verse Through Revelation"

**Acts 19:9b-10 (HCSB)** <sup>9</sup>...he withdrew from them and met separately with the disciples, conducting discussions every day in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. <sup>10</sup>And this went on for two years, so that all the inhabitants of the province of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord."

**John 16:33b (NKJV)** "In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

**1 Peter 5:10 (NASB)** "After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen *and* establish you."

"Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trials and suffering can the soul be strengthened, vision cleared, ambition inspired, and success achieved."

—Helen Keller

I. The Correspondent (v. 8)

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

"In the midst of trials, let us remember that Jesus existed before time, that He rules over time, and that He will reign for all time! What we suffer here is insignificant compared to the eternal glory that awaits us there."

—Steven Lawson

II. The Commendation (v. 9)

**John 1:11 (NKJV)** "He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him."

**1 Peter 3:18 (NKJV)** "For Christ also suffered once for sins..."

**Revelation 3:17 (NKJV)** "Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked."

**Romans 2:28-29 (NKJV)** <sup>28</sup>For he is not a Jew who *is one* outwardly, nor *is* circumcision that which *is* outward in the flesh; <sup>29</sup>but *he is* a Jew who *is one* inwardly; and circumcision *is that* of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise *is* not from men but from God."

**John 8:44a (NKJV)** "You are of *your* father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do."

III. The Command (v. 10)

IV. The Counsel (v. 11)

**Revelation 20:14 (HCSB)** “Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.”

**Revelation 21:8 (NKJV)** “But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.”

#### **THE OLDEST ACCOUNT OF A CHRISTIAN DYING FOR JESUS CHRIST (POLYCARP, PASTOR OF SMYRNA, 155 AD)**

Now the most admirable Polycarp, when he first heard the news, was not disturbed. In fact, he wanted to remain in town, but the majority persuaded him to withdraw. So he withdrew to a farm not far distant from the city. And as those who were searching for him persisted, he moved to another farm. Mounted police and horsemen, closing in on him late in the evening, found him in bed in an upstairs room in a small cottage; and though he still could have escaped from there to another place, he refused, saying, “May God’s will be done.” After transferring him to their carriage and sitting down at his side, they tried to persuade him, saying, “Why, what harm is there in saying, ‘Caesar is Lord,’ and offering incense” (and other words to this effect) “and thereby saving yourself?” Now at first he gave them no answer. But when they persisted, he said, “I am not about to do what you are suggesting to me.” He was led to the stadium. There was such a tumult in the stadium that no one could even be heard. But as Polycarp entered the stadium, there came a voice from heaven: “Be strong, Polycarp, and act like a man.” And no one saw the speaker, but those of our people who were present heard the voice. The proconsul tried to persuade him to recant, saying, “Have respect for your age,” and other such things as they are accustomed to say. When the magistrate persisted and said, “Swear the oath, and I will release you; revile Christ,” Polycarp replied, “For eighty-six years I have been His servant, and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” So the proconsul said: “I have wild beasts; I will throw you to them, unless you change your mind.” But he said: “Call for them!” The he said to him again: “I will have you consumed by fire, since you despise the wild beasts, unless you change your mind.” But Polycarp said: “You threaten with a fire that burns only briefly and after just a little while is extinguished, for you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment, which is reserved for the ungodly. But why do you delay? Come, do what you wish.”

The proconsul was astonished, and sent his own herald into the midst of the stadium to proclaim three times: “Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian.” When this was proclaimed by the herald, the entire crowd, Gentiles as well as Jews living in Smyrna, cried out with uncontrollable anger and with a loud shout: “This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our gods, who teaches many not to sacrifice or worship.” The crowd swiftly collected wood and kindling from the workshops and baths, the Jews being especially eager to assist in this, as is their custom. Then the materials prepared for the pyre were placed around him; and as they were also about to nail him, he said: “Leave me as I am; for He who enables me to endure the fire will also enable me to remain on the pyre without moving, even without the sense of security which you get from the nails.” So they did not nail him, but tied him instead. Then he, having placed his hands behind him and having been bound, looked up to heaven and said: “O Lord God Almighty, Father of your beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, through whom we have received knowledge of you, the God of angels and powers and of all creation, and of the whole race of the righteous who live in Your presence, I bless You because You have considered me worthy of this day and hour, that I might receive a place among the number of the martyrs in the cup of Your Christ, to the resurrection to eternal life, both of soul and of body, in the incorruptibility of the Holy Spirit. May I be received among them in Your presence today, as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, as You have prepared and revealed beforehand, and have now accomplished, You who are the undecieving and true God. For this reason, indeed for all things, I praise You, I bless You, I glorify You, through the eternal and heavenly High Priest, Jesus Christ, Your beloved Son, through whom to You with him and the Holy Spirit be glory both now and for the ages to come. Amen.” When he had offered up the “Amen” and finished his prayer, the men in charge of the fire lit the fire.

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, 2-3-13 PM  
“THE SUFFERING CHURCH”  
REVELATION 2:8-11  
#4 in Series, “Verse by Verse through Revelation”

Looks can be deceiving. I played football in High School (through my junior year when we moved). I remember two games from my last year. In one game the man I was assigned to block when we were on offense (everybody played “both ways” – offense and defense in those days) was well over 6 feet tall and weighed 285 pounds. Things have changed a lot since those days. I weighed 180 and I was the second biggest guy on my team. The county paper had published an article on this big guy. I did not look forward to the Friday night we had to play this team. As it turns out, looks were deceiving. He was a big creampuff! I just hit him and down he went down. My biggest problem was getting out of the way after I hit him so he didn’t fall on me. In a later game, the man I was assigned to block was listed at 145 pounds. He didn’t look like he weighed that much. I figured I was in for an easy night. Looks can be deceiving. He wore me out. He was so fast, I couldn’t block him. He spent much of the game in our backfield throwing the quarterback and running backs for a loss. It was really embarrassing! The coach didn’t give me the game ball after that game. Not only can looks be deceiving in football opponents, looks can be deceiving when it comes to churches. Typically in America, we deem a church to be successful based on things we can see and measure. Success is often determined by “nickels and noses” or to put it another way, success is measured by buildings, budgets, and baptisms. Looks can be deceiving!

As we look at these seven churches that were real churches, but represent all churches in all Christian history, we would say that the successful church was the church at Ephesus. Most would judge the church at Smyrna to be an insignificant church. The church at Ephesus was doubtlessly very large; it had the prestige of having been started by the Apostle Paul and pastored by Timothy and the Apostle John. The church at Ephesus had more programs and doubtlessly had a reputation of being a very successful church. Yet, Jesus had some very stern words for the church at Ephesus. They forgot that the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing! While they had much to commend them, they had forsaken the most important thing. They had left their first love for the Lord Jesus Himself. This sin was so serious that Jesus threatened to take away their privilege of being his church to represent Him here on this earth. Smyrna on the other hand is one of the two churches of these seven that Jesus had nothing negative to say – nothing!

Let’s look at a little background on this church by looking at the city of Smyrna where the church was located. Smyrna is still a thriving city today. It is located in modern day Turkey and is called Izmir. Today, it is the third largest city in Turkey. It is located about 35-40 miles from ancient Ephesus. There are some things we know about the city of Smyrna at the end of the first century that explain why we call the church there, the suffering or the persecuted church. Politically, Smyrna was really tight with Rome and the imperial cult which involved the worship of the Roman Emperor or Caesar. Caesar’s image that was carved in marble was placed in a prominent place in the city of Smyrna. Every citizen was called upon to annually confess allegiance to Caesar by confessing that Caesar is lord. Anyone who refused to worship Caesar would be severely punished. At the least they would have been excluded from the labor guilds (similar to unions today) which meant it would be almost impossible to make a living wage. At the worst, they could expect imprisonment or even death. Spiritually, Smyrna had temples for the purpose of worshipping Apollos, Asclepius, Aphrodite, Cybele, and Zeus. These pagan religions would not have been friendly with or accepting of Christianity. In addition, there was a strong Jewish presence in Smyrna. The Jews did not have to deal with the issue of Caesar worship since they were viewed as an accepted religion in the empire. As we will see, the church at Smyrna had trouble with the Jews who opposed them.

Let’s look at a little background on the church at Smyrna itself. We are not told how the church started, but it is likely that it was started during the three years Paul ministered at Ephesus. We read in Acts 19 that after the church at Ephesus was established, Paul continued there for two years and the Gospel was preached in that whole area. **Acts 19:9b-10 (HCSB)** “... he [Paul] withdrew from them and met

separately with the disciples, conducting discussions every day in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. <sup>10</sup> And this went on for two years, so that all the inhabitants of the province of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord.” Remember that Smyrna was only 35-40 miles from Ephesus. Smyrna was no easy place to be a Christian! They would have refused to bow before the marble statue of Caesar and confess “Caesar is lord”. They were thought of as being disloyal to Rome in a city known for its patriotism and loyalty to Rome. For their perceived disloyalty, they would have undergone much persecution. The pagan religions would have persecuted them for their exclusivity of believing that Jesus is the only way. The Jews were persecuting them because these Jews had rejected Jesus as the Christ (Messiah). I think you can see why I entitled this message that focuses on the church at Smyrna, “The Suffering Church”.

Living in this world, we will not escape suffering from the world. Jesus Himself said in **John 16:33b (NKJV)** “In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” Why does God allow suffering in the lives of His people? I think that the answer to that question is illustrated by looking at the meaning of the name for the town where this church was located. The name “Smyrna” means myrrh. Myrrh was a fragrant spice that was used to make perfume. To get the sweet smelling fragrance, the material from the myrrh tree had to be crushed. When the church at “Myrrh” was crushed with persecution, it gave off a sweet savor to God. A great paradox we observe in church history is that the more the church suffers, the greater is its purity and strength. In individuals, the Bible links suffering with spiritual growth. **1 Peter 5:10 (NASB)** “After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen *and* establish you.” Helen Keller who was blind and deaf said, “Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trials and suffering can the soul be strengthened, vision cleared, ambition inspired, and success achieved.” Let’s learn some lessons from this suffering church.

## I. The Correspondent (V8)

In ancient letters, the sender identifies himself at the very beginning of the letter. To each church, Jesus gives a relevant description of Himself that fits what is going on in that particular church. The first description Jesus gives of Himself to this suffering church is “the First and the Last”. That description or title identifies the fact that He is deity because that is a title given to God in Isaiah 44:6 and 48:12. This title as we saw a few weeks ago when we looked at 1:17 speaks to His eternity. It communicates that at the beginning He was already there and when things are brought to a conclusion here, He still will be. He existed before there was a time dimension and will still exist when time is no more. He IS in eternity past and He WILL BE in eternity future. Why did Jesus remind this suffering church of His eternity? It is because the number one thing that we need to be reminded of in times of tribulation and suffering is to see from an eternal perspective. It is put this way in **Romans 8:18 (HCSB)** “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is going to be revealed to us.” Steven Lawson said, “In the midst of trials, let us remember that Jesus existed before time, that He rules over time, and that He will reign for all time! What we suffer here is insignificant compared to the eternal glory that awaits us there.” [Steven Lawson, *Final Call*, Page 95].

The second description Jesus gives of Himself is the One “who was dead, and came to life”. To this church that faced the possibility of physical death for their faith, Jesus reminds them that He understands because He died in the flesh at Calvary. Jesus also reminds them that they do not need to fear because He is now alive (resurrected) and death has been defeated.

## II. The Commendation (V9)

Nothing is more comforting in times of tribulation than those two words from the Lord Jesus, “I know”. Whatever we are going through, it has not caught Him by surprise. He knows! That word translated “know” emphasizes knowing through personal experience. No suffering comes to us that is apart from His knowing and allowing.

The Lord details the types of suffering that the Christians at Smyrna are experiencing. First, He reminds them that He knows their tribulation. The Greek word means to be crushed beneath a weight. It was used

of someone being slowly crushed to death beneath a huge boulder. The Christians at Smyrna were being crushed primarily by the Roman government. Because they refused to worship the Emperor Domitian, they were under the constant pressure of death, torture, or imprisonment. Let's bring this from the first century to today. What is the pressure you are under that you feel is like a giant boulder crushing the very life out of you? Is it rejection by someone you love? **John 1:11 (NKJV)** "He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him." He knows. Is the pressure of something physical? **1 Peter 3:18a (NKJV)** "For Christ also suffered once for sins..." Is it stress from expectations placed upon you? In the Garden of Gethsemane He sweat drops of blood because of the anticipation of bearing our sins and experiencing the wrath of the Father and being separated from Him on our behalf. Whatever is crushing you, He knows and He is in control. Allow the crushing to make you like the myrrh and give off the sweet savor of Christ. Just as the people of the church in Smyrna were being pressured by the culture around them, we are also. The penalty is not imprisonment or death ... yet, but there is pressure nevertheless to conform to the world's values and ways.

Second, the Lord reminds them that He knows their poverty. There are two Greek words for poverty. One means to struggle to provide what is needed, but the one used here speaks of abject total poverty. It means to have nothing. Their poverty was not because of a down economy. Things were booming in Smyrna. The linking of their poverty and their tribulation suggests that they were related. They were poor because of they were Christians who refused to confess that Caesar is Lord. As we stated earlier, the labor guilds had likely excluded them and the people saw them as disloyal to Rome and so no doubt their shops and businesses were boycotted. The Lord encourages them to take the eternal perspective. In reality they were rich. It's interesting the difference that an eternal perspective makes. The church at Laodicea was the "compromise with the world" church. They thought that they were rich, but God said in **Revelation 3:17 (NKJV)** "Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'--and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked". To the church at Smyrna that thought they were poor, the Lord helped them see from the eternal perspective that they were rich. From the eternal perspective, they had every spiritual blessing in the Heavenly places (Ephesians 1:3). Their sins were forgiven; they had peace with God; they had a clear conscience; they had a future and a hope. They were rich!

Third, the Lord tells them that He knows how these Jews blasphemed them. As I stated earlier, there was a large Jewish community in Smyrna that was very hostile to Christianity. The word translated "blasphemy" means to slander or speak against. It seems that these Jews were spreading slanderous lies about the Christians in Smyrna. They were also likely stirring up the crowds against them. We know from historical sources that Christians were often accused of cannibalism because they spoke of eating Christ's flesh and drinking His blood in relation to the Lord's Supper. That was only one of the many slanderous accusations against the Christians. Jesus says what Paul said in **Romans 2:28-29 (NKJV)** "<sup>28</sup>For he is not a Jew who *is one* outwardly, nor *is* circumcision that which *is* outward in the flesh; <sup>29</sup>but *he is* a Jew who *is one* inwardly; and circumcision *is that* of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise *is* not from men but from God." These Jews were descendents of Abraham by physical birth, but not spiritual birth. Physical heritage is no guarantee of spiritual right standing. Though they were physical descendents of Abraham, they were acting as Satan's agents. Jesus told some Jewish leaders with similar views in **John 8:44a (NKJV)** "You are of *your* father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do." Jesus calls the place where these Jews met, "a synagogue of Satan".

### III. The Command (V10)

Basically the Lord says to this suffering church, "Do not fear; it will get worse!" As we saw in a previous study, numbers have meaning in the book of Revelation. The number 10 is often associated with intensity. Jesus says that the persecution is not over. A new intensity of persecution was coming. They would be tested to the limit, but the testing would be limited. Remember that He is in control. He will not allow us to be tested or tempted beyond our limits (1 Corinthians 10:13). Our God is not in His Heaven wringing His hands in worry that He allowed the testing to get too intense. His hand is on the thermostat

and He never makes a mistake. The testing is not for God's sake, but for ours. He already knows how we will do on the test. The test is for our benefit. We are the ones who learn from God's testings that He allows. Notice also that even though God uses Satan to bring the test, God is still in control. Satan can only do that which God allows him to do.

In the last part of verse 10 we see a promise to this suffering church. To those who don't fold under the pressure of persecution and suffering, the Lord Jesus Himself promises a great reward. It is called "the crown of life". This crown was the victor's crown in the annual athletic games that the people in the church at Smyrna would be very familiar with. After a life of suffering and faithfulness in the midst of the suffering, we are ushered into glory to receive the winner's crown. No persecution or suffering can rob us of eternal reward; when we are faithful in our suffering, the eternal reward is only increased.

#### IV. The Counsel (V11)

Remember that 1 John 5:4,5 tells us that an overcomer is synonymous with a Christian. Overcomers are not a special category of Christians; all Christians are overcomers. In times of persecution and suffering, we not only have the promise of the winner's crown of life, we have the assurance that we will escape the second death. What is the second death? The second death is eternal separation from God and all that is good. The second death is Hell. **Revelation 20:14 (HCSB)** "Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire." **Revelation 21:8 (NKJV)** "But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death." The first death is physical death. The second death is eternity with conscious existence in Hell. Someone put it this way: "Those who are born only once will die twice, but those who are born twice will only die once." Those who have not experienced the new birth will die physically and also experience eternity in Hell (the second death). Those who are born physically and then are born again will only die physically. The overcomers are to have no fear of eternity separated from God in Hell. Overcomers can face the first death without fear because the second death has no power over us. Physical death simply ushers us into the presence of our blessed Lord.

#### CONCLUSION

Let me close with an account of the death of a man named Polycarp. He served as the pastor, the bishop of the church at Smyrna. He had been a disciple of John and was greatly loved and respected by the churches. However the citizens of Smyrna did not hold him with the same esteem. In A.D. 155 the authorities sought his arrest. Events moved quickly and what follows is the record of his death, the oldest account of a Christian dying for Jesus outside the New Testament.

"Now the most admirable Polycarp, when he first heard the news, was not disturbed. In fact, he wanted to remain in town, but the majority persuaded him to withdraw. So he withdrew to a farm not far distant from the city. And as those who were searching for him persisted, he moved to another farm. Mounted police and horsemen, closing in on him late in the evening, found him in bed in an upstairs room in a small cottage; and though he still could have escaped from there to another place, he refused, saying, "May God's will be done." After transferring him to their carriage and sitting down at his side, they tried to persuade him, saying, "Why, what harm is there in saying, 'Caesar is Lord,' and offering incense" (and other words to this effect) "and thereby saving yourself?" Now at first he gave them no answer. But when they persisted, he said, "I am not about to do what you are suggesting to me." He was led to the stadium. There was such a tumult in the stadium that no one could even be heard. But as Polycarp entered the stadium, there came a voice from heaven: "Be strong, Polycarp, and act like a man." And no one saw the speaker, but those of our people who were present heard the voice. The proconsul tried to persuade him to recant, saying, "Have respect for your age," and other such things as they are accustomed to say. When the magistrate persisted and said, "Swear the oath, and I will release you; revile Christ," Polycarp replied, "For eighty-six years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" So the proconsul said: "I have wild beasts; I will throw you to them, unless you change your mind." But he said: "Call for them!" Then he said to him again: "I will have you consumed by

fire, since you despise the wild beasts, unless you change your mind.” But Polycarp said: “You threaten with a fire that burns only briefly and after just a little while is extinguished, for you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment, which is reserved for the ungodly. But why do you delay? Come, do what you wish.”

The proconsul was astonished, and sent his own herald into the midst of the stadium to proclaim three times: “Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian.” When this was proclaimed by the herald, the entire crowd, Gentiles as well as Jews living in Smyrna, cried out with uncontrollable anger and with a loud shout: “This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our gods, who teaches many not to sacrifice or worship.” The crowd swiftly collected wood and kindling from the workshops and baths, the Jews being especially eager to assist in this, as is their custom. Then the materials prepared for the pyre were placed around him; and as they were also about to nail him, he said: “Leave me as I am; for he who enables me to endure the fire will also enable me to remain on the pyre without moving, even without the sense of security which you get from the nails.” So they did not nail him, but tied him instead. Then he, having placed his hands behind him and having been bound, looked up to heaven and said: “O Lord God Almighty, Father of your beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, through whom we have received knowledge of you, the God of angels and powers and of all creation, and of the whole race of the righteous who live in your presence, I bless you because you have considered me worthy of this day and hour, that I might receive a place among the number of the martyrs in the cup of your Christ, to the resurrection to eternal life, both of soul and of body, in the incorruptibility of the Holy Spirit. May I be received among them in your presence today, as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, as you have prepared and revealed beforehand, and have now accomplished, you who are the undecieving and true God. For this reason, indeed for all things, I praise you, I bless you, I glorify you, through the eternal and heavenly High Priest, Jesus Christ, your beloved Son, through whom to you with him and the Holy Spirit be glory both now and for the ages to come. Amen.” When he had offered up the “Amen” and finished his prayer, the men in charge of the fire lit the fire.”

Polycarp was faithful until death and he was ushered into the presence of God where a crown of life awaited him. Even though we will not likely be called upon to be martyred for our faith, when persecution comes, when suffering comes, may we continue to be faithful and to glorify Him until He takes us home.