

The Letters to the Seven Churches, Part II- *Enduring Persecution and Suffering*

Call to Worship: Revelation 21:6-8

Hymn #79- *Though Troubles Assail Us*

1st Scripture: 1 Peter 1:1-9

Hymn #727- *When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder*

2nd Scripture: Revelation 2:8-11

Hymn #725- *His Eye Is on the Sparrow*

Introduction:

Some of you may recall the name, “Polycarp,” if you have read through *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*. Polycarp was the Bishop of Smyrna from AD115 through AD155 (when he was martyred). Needless to say, in both its timing and descriptive account, the recording of Polycarp’s martyrdom goes so well with this letter written to the church of Smyrna. Listen to a portion of what brother John Foxe later penned about the murder and martyrdom of Polycarp, when he had been brought into a stadium full of mockers and onlookers, to stand trial before the proconsul for his unwillingness to ascribe worship to the Roman Emperor while denying Christ:

“The proconsul asked him, if he were Polycarp. When he assented, the former counseled him to deny Christ, saying, ‘Consider thyself, and have pity on thy own great age’; and many other such-like speeches which they were wont to make:--‘Swear by the fortune of Caesar’—‘Repent’—‘Say, Away with the atheists.’ Then Polycarp, with a grave aspect, beholding all the multitude in the stadium, and waving his hand to them, gave a deep sigh, and, looking up to heaven said, ‘Take away the atheists.’ The proconsul then urged him, saying, ‘Swear, and I will release thee;--reproach Christ.’ Polycarp answered, ‘Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never once wronged me; how then shall I blaspheme my King, Who hath saved me?’ The proconsul again urged him, ‘Swear by the fortune of Caesar.’ Polycarp replied, ‘Since you still vainly strive to make me swear by the fortune of Caesar, as you express it, affecting ignorance of my real character, hear me frankly declaring what I am—I am a Christian—and if you desire to learn the Christian doctrine, assign me a day, and you shall hear.’ Hereupon the proconsul said, ‘I have wild beasts; and I will expose you to them, unless you repent.’ ‘Call for them,’ replied Polycarp; ‘for repentance with us is a wicked thing, if it is to be a change from the better to the worse, but a good thing if it is to be a change from evil to good.’ ‘I will tame thee with fire,’ said the proconsul, ‘since you despise the wild beasts, unless you repent.’ Then said Polycarp, ‘You threaten me with fire, which burns for an hour, and is soon extinguished; but the fire of the future judgment, and of eternal punishment reserved for the ungodly, you are ignorant of. But why do you delay? Do whatever you please.’

And from there, Polycarp was taken to be burned and ultimately killed, with the aid of the Jews, who helped gather wood for the fire, since they hated the Christians as well.

As we move on now to consider this second letter, written to the church of Smyrna, we will find this account of the martyrdom of the faithful Bishop Polycarp to be quite the clear and prophetic example of that which is stated in the letter.

Similar to the format we have used in our consideration of the letter written to the church of Ephesus, we will consider a brief historical background of the city of Smyrna (during the time of the Apostle John of course), before working through the headings in the chart that you were given two weeks ago.

I. Smyrna: An Historical Background

In his book, *More Than Conquerors*, William Hendriksen provides us with the following brief historical background of the city of Smyrna:

“This city, located on an arm of the Aegean Sea, was a rival of Ephesus. It claimed to be the ‘First City of Asia in beauty and size.’ A gloriously picturesque city, it sloped up from the sea, and its splendid public buildings on the rounded top of the hill Pagos formed what was known as ‘the crown of Smyrna.’ The westerly breeze, the zephyr, comes from the sea and blows through every part of the city rendering it fresh and cool even during the summer. From the very beginning of Rome’s rise to power, even before its days of greatness, Smyrna was its loyal ally and was recognized as such by Rome. The faithfulness and loyalty of the Smyrnians became proverbial. In all probability the church at Smyrna was founded by Paul during his third journey, AD 53-56. We are not sure of this, but it would seem to be a safe conclusion from what we read in Acts 19:10, ‘...so that all they that dwelt in Asia heard the Word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.’ It is possible that Polycarp was bishop of the church at Smyrna at this time. He was a pupil of John. Faithful to death, this venerable leader was burned at the stake in the year AD 155.”

And then, let me just add these additional words from Robert Mounce:

“Smyrna sustained a special relationship to Rome and the imperial cult. During the period when Rome was engaged in a struggle for supremacy against the Carthaginian empire (roughly 265-146 B.C.) Smyrna had placed itself squarely on the side of the Romans, and in 195 B.C. it became the first city in the ancient world to build a temple in honor of *Dea Roma*. Later,

in 23 BC, Smyrna won permission (over ten other Asian cities) to build a temple to the emperor Tiberius. This strong allegiance to Rome plus a large Jewish population that was actively hostile to the Christians made it exceptionally difficult to live as a Christian in Smyrna. The most famous martyrdom of the early church fathers was that of the elderly Polycarp, the “twelfth martyr in Smyrna,” who, upon his refusal to acknowledge Caesar as Lord, was placed upon a pyre to be burned.”

And so, brethren, I think that when we consider these historical backgrounds, we can easily appreciate the things that Christ says specifically to the church at Smyrna.

II. Christ’s Self-Designation

“These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life” (vs. 8).

What a wonderful and comforting self-designation written to a church that is faithfully undergoing and enduring tribulation and suffering, and will continue to do so for a definite period of time, all for the Name of Christ.

Here, our Lord comforts His suffering readers by reminding them once again of whom it is that they have continued to put their trust and confidence in. These poor and dejected, persecuted, outcasts of society are addressed by the One who is “the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life.”

And what does such a self-designation mean for a persecuted, suffering church? Well, it means everything, because the One to whom they were inseparably united by faith, is both the One who is universally sovereign over all things (He owns eternity), and the One who *has already* conquered death Himself. In other words, this blessed King Jesus has every single event of the history of the church at Smyrna (and the history of the world for that matter) unfolding in the very palm of His hands, in accordance with His pre-determined, divine will. And nothing whatsoever could ultimately harm the faith and welfare of His people, though they are persecuted unto prison and even death itself. And furthermore, this is the One who Himself had been persecuted and put to death, only to be raised again three days later. And so, His victory assumed and guaranteed theirs as well. Their history and their eternal destiny were in His hands, and therefore, they had nothing ultimately to fear by the upcoming threats and actions of their

persecutors. Christ's victory on the cross was a pre-requisite to their own guaranteed victory. Nothing, therefore, could separate them from the love of God, which was in this Christ Jesus! And this was the critical importance of this specific self-designation, given by Christ at the beginning of this letter to the brethren at Smyrna.

III. Christ's Commendation

"I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of satan" (vs. 10).

Here, the all-seeing, ever present sovereign Lord comforts the brethren at Smyrna by assuring them that He is well aware of all that is going on in their midst:

1) He knows their *works*. He is aware of their ongoing, consistent, faithful labors for His Name. They are true servants of the Lord Jesus Christ, who have sacrificed and continue to sacrifice much for the sake of the Gospel.

2) He knows their *tribulation*. Their faithful labors are doubly God-glorifying because they are done in the midst of tribulation and suffering. They are a tried people, enduring many trials for the sake of the Kingdom of Christ.

3) He knows their *poverty*. Their faithful labors in the Gospel; their Christian witness has led them to the place where they have become physically impoverished. To be sure, because of the solid connection and alliance of Smyrna with Rome, the imperial cult; the cult of emperor worship was predominant there. And only those who participated in the idolatrous practices, which served this cult, would remain prosperous and be given many advantages in their field of trade. The brethren at Smyrna, however, would not compromise. They chose faithfulness to Christ and the Gospel, and because they chose this course, they chose poverty. However, at the same time, they chose the better, more lasting riches that come to all who remain faithful to Christ. Though they were poor physically and in the present; though they *seemed* poor from every outward standpoint, in reality, underneath it all, they were truly rich, and so, King Jesus reminds them of this reality, so that they might be encouraged to continue onward for His

Name's sake. The eternal heavenly blessings that belong to those who endure and who refuse to compromise belonged to them.

4) He knew *the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of satan*. Smyrna had the largest population of Jews out of any city in Asia, and these Jews were not too thrilled to see the spread of Christianity threatening their “works oriented” hypocritical religion. And so, they blasphemed the Christian doctrines that were taught and disseminated by the church at Smyrna, and they looked for any and every opportunity to accuse the brethren there, so that they might be persecuted, imprisoned and even put to death by the Romans. We saw this with Polycarp. The Jews were so determined to see Polycarp killed, that they even helped gather wood on the Sabbath day, to support his burning.

Our Lord states some very stark words about these Jews here. He says that they are not *real* Jews and He calls them a “synagogue of satan.” In other words, all of their so-called acts of worship and commitment to God were actually services unto satan himself. They worshipped and served satan and they performed satan's work in the persecuting of Christ's sheep. They were not true children of Abraham, because a Jew is not a Jew outwardly, but a true Jew is one who shares the same inward *faith* as Abraham. And brethren, let this teach us something significant about Judaism in its current state, lest we fall into the trap of thinking that they are somehow blessed in their present state simply because they are ethnically “Jewish.” Until and unless the Gospel of Jesus Christ is embraced by the Jews, we have no right or warrant to see them as any more blessed than the unconverted heathen. May God bring about a great revival in Israel, even in the present, but as it stands right now, in a general sense, “the blood of Christ's murder is still on them and their children.” And so, let us pray for the conversion of Israel, but let us not call them blessed as long as they serve a god who is *not* the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus called the rebellious Jews in Smyrna a “synagogue of satan.”

These then, are the commendations that our Lord directs toward the church at Smyrna. They were faithfully working for the Kingdom of God in the midst of tribulation, poverty and suffering, while enduring the blasphemous accusations and opposition of the Jewish people who lived in their midst. And brethren, as we pray for such churches throughout the world, especially those suffering from oppressive cults such as Islam, Hinduism, Marxism and etc, let us remember at the same time, how rich and how blessed they are in Christ.

IV. Christ's Words of Rebuke

Our Lord has no words of rebuke for the brethren at Smyrna. Again, this is not to say that they were without sin, but rather, it is a testimony both to the patient grace of God, and the striving, ongoing, faithful efforts of the church at Smyrna, in their war against sin and in their commitment to loving and serving Christ.

V. Christ's Solution

The Smyrnians receive no solution to any specific sin, because they are not being rebuked for any sin. However, they do receive instruction concerning what to do in light of their ongoing suffering and persecution.

“Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life” (vs. 10). The suffering and trials that the church of Smyrna had been enduring were to continue, and perhaps even increase. To be sure, some would be thrown into prison and some would even face death. However, our Lord tells them not to fear the things that they are about to suffer. He exhorts them not to allow any threats and/or persecutions to shake their faith. All of these things are pre-ordained and will be used to test and approve them unto the glory of God. Those who mean their harm for evil (those who serve the devil and his wicked plans) will only serve to accomplish all that God means for their good. And they must keep this proper perspective all the way to the end. They must remember what “really is”; they must bring to mind what God is truly doing, in the light of what “seems to be”; in the light of what man intends and declares to be true.

In fact, their tribulation is set for an exact period of time, in accordance with God's designed plan. They will suffer for “ten days,” not a literal ten days, but for a specific, limited, designated portion of time, appointed by God. And their tribulation; their testing will carry them not a moment further than what God has preordained. And if they endure; if they are faithful even unto death, they will achieve God's end and inherit the blessing, namely, the “crown of life.” In other words, if they cling to the Word of Christ; if they refuse to compromise and

remain steadfast in their commitment to the Gospel, even unto the point of losing their very lives, their death will only serve as a portal for carrying them into eternal bliss. They will be given the victorious crown; the overcomer's crown of life!

Some of you may be wondering, "Where does this figure of 'ten days' come from? What is the significance of this number ten, and why is it used here? Is it just some random, arbitrary number?" No, brethren, I believe that this "ten day testing" was meant to lead the readers to reflect upon something very significant that had happen in the Old Testament. Some of you might recall a significant event that had happened in Daniel chapter one, when Daniel and his three friends had faced a critical "rubber meets the road" moment in their faith. All of the young men, who were called to train and serve in the king's palace, were ordered to eat of the king's delicacies as well. However, Daniel and his three friends knew that to do so, would be to dishonor their God. Such food was unclean and unacceptable to them. Being in captivity and surrounded by all who were following the king's orders, the temptation to compromise could have been very strong for these Jewish young men. And yet, they had purposed in their hearts not to be defiled by eating of the king's delicacies and drinking his wine. Concerned for his own welfare, since he was responsible for carrying out the king's orders, and yet a friend of Daniels at the same time, the chief of the eunuchs had explained to Daniel that his failure to eat of the king's food would ultimately lead to his own death, since he was responsible for overseeing their care. And so, Daniel made a request of the chief, asking him to test them for "ten days," allowing them to eat vegetables and drink water alone, and if their appearance looked as good as those who were eating of the king's delicacies, then they would continue on with that diet. And if they looked worse, Daniel and his friends would be willing to suffer any necessary consequences for their actions. Sure enough, after ten days of testing, God had honored the faithfulness of these men, and had made their appearance even better than all who had eaten of the king's delicacies.

And so, brethren, the Smyrnians were to reflect upon the faith of Daniel, who in his unwillingness to compromise, found God, sovereignly working on their behalf. And in the end, through all of their trials, as they continued to remain faithful, they were exalted and elevated in the kingdom of Babylon. The brethren at Smyrna needed to maintain such a faith as this, not compromising in spite of any and all threats to their lives, confident that the Christ in whom they

have put their trust, would ultimately bring them to receive the crown of life. And so, the “ten days,” rather than implying a literal ten day period, were to remind them of all that had happened with Daniel and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and how God sovereignly rewarded their faithfulness. The suffering of the Smyrnians would lead some to be imprisoned and some would even be killed, but the period of their suffering would be short, and confined to God’s pre-ordained will. [Note: Much of the Book of Daniel is found dispersed throughout Revelation]

And what a great encouragement for us, brethren! We have no idea of what to expect in this country over the next several years, months or even days. But we have nothing to fear at the same time. Will Christians face physical persecutions? Will we fall into an economic collapse that leads to the impoverishment of those who are unwilling to compromise their faith in Christ? Whatever happens, we can remain unmoved, if we constantly remind ourselves that all of our sufferings are limited to the sphere of God’s preordained will for our sanctification and for the glory of Christ. All of our endured sufferings for the Gospel are producing in us a faith that is more precious than silver and gold, which perish, and our faith, though it is tested by fire, will be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen we love. Beneath all that is seen, remains the unseen and yet sure promise of a crown of life, which awaits all who finish the race of faith. James speaks to this same end, when he states in James 1:12, “Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life.”

VI. Christ’s Warning

Again, since the church at Smyrna receives no rebuke, there is no warning to repent. However, there is an additional, significant promise given them.

VII. Christ’s Promise to Overcomers

Indeed, the Smyrnians would receive the crown of life, but furthermore, if they continued to remain faithful to the end; if they maintained their unwillingness to compromise even to the

expense of their own lives; if they had ears to hear what the Spirit was saying to the churches; “He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death” (vs. 11b).

Ultimately, the brethren at Smyrna had nothing to fear in the threats of the Jews or the Romans because, at best, they could kill the body alone, leading them to the first death. But that which ought to be feared by all, namely the second death; that is, the death of eternal torment in hell; should greatly concern them. However, if they continued to persevere, they had nothing to worry about concerning the second death, whatsoever. For, all who overcome in Christ will not be hurt by the second death. It cannot touch them. In fact, the wording here is so strong that it is meant to say in the most emphatic terms that there is no possible way whatsoever that the second death could affect any and all who abide in Christ. And again, brethren, all of these things that we are touching upon in these seven letters will be greatly expanded upon in the visions that make up the rest of the Revelation.

Concluding Thoughts

Brethren, in closing, let me ask you this morning, what if everything collapses tomorrow and life ceases to ever be the same, especially for all who name the name of Christ? If we were to face persecution or we were to become impoverished or our very lives were threatened for our faith, how would we fare for the Name of Christ?

Would we cling to our Savior at any cost? Is our hope truly in the glory to come beyond death's door? Do we really believe in the power and glory of our invisible God, and is His will the settled campground of our immortal souls? What if we are tested like never before, unto the tearing and destruction of these bodies? Will we stand firm to the end? What does your life speak to that end *in the present*? Does your life *presently* exhibit the type of life that states loudly, “This is not my home?” “I have taken up my cross to follow Christ. I wait for a city that has as its maker and builder, the living God. I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live for myself, but for the Christ who has loved me and given Himself for me?” You see, brethren, this is the type of heart we must strive to have *now*, if we are to persevere through anything that comes our way.

And the good news is that if we maintain such a heart, we can be certain that we will obtain the “crown of life” and we will *not* face the second death! For, all that comes to pass is in the hands of our blessed, sovereign Savior, who is “the First and the Last,” and who has Himself conquered death for us. And every evil, destructive tactic of satan that reaches us, reaches us in accordance with God’s divine, sovereign appointment, as He would test us unto our own good and His glory! And all of it is confined within a preset, preordained, allotted portion of time, overseen and directed by God Himself. Our greatest enemy is but an angry, raging pit bull, bound by an immovable collar, attached to an unbreakable leash that rests firmly within the hands of *our God!* As with the case of Job, our God states to satan, “Go this far and not a hair further.” Let us, therefore, stand fast, brethren, and wholly cast our souls into the service of our glorious Christ!

The Gospel- [Concerning the Second Death]

AMEN!!!

Benediction: Jude 1:24&25