

## **Introduction**

Think of a city to which you would like to go on vacation or even better to live where there is beauty and where the temperatures are just right all year round. You would be both near the water and near the mountains. There would be a rich cultural life and plenty to see and do. The city would enjoy a thriving economy that would offer the likelihood of a well-paying job. If you lived in the first century anywhere near Asia Minor, the city of which you would probably be thinking would be the ancient city of Smyrna. It is the modern Turkish city of Izmir.

The city of Smyrna was located right on the coast in a warm climate but which enjoyed a light cooling breeze off of the Aegean Sea. It was a center of natural and man-made beauty. It was also a hub of culture and art. We attach slogans and tag lines to cities and places. Wisconsin is the badger state and America's dairyland. Milwaukee is called cream city because of the light colored bricks found throughout the city. The ancient city of Smyrna had its tagline as well. Smyrna was officially designated as "The First." It was "The FIRST city of Asia Minor in beauty and size." Moreover, the city took pride in that it was a city that had seemingly risen from the dead. It was destroyed in 700 BC and rebuilt some 300 years later. The city rose up from the sea and was predominated by a mountain reaching an altitude of 600 ft. The top of the mount was encircled with a series of impressive architectural constructions which came to be called the "Crown of Smyrna." Historically the city of Smyrna was known for its strong ties to Rome. In 26 AD a temple to the Emperor Tiberias was constructed here. Its citizens were required to make an annual incense offering there and proclaim "Caesar is Lord." To fail to do so was punishable by imprisonment and even death. Incidentally, many Jews fled Jerusalem after 70 AD when the Romans destroyed the holy city. Large numbers found their way to make Smyrna their home.

Now with these details in mind, let's look over the shoulders of the church in Smyrna as they read the letter Jesus sent to them.

[Read Text and Pray]

The main point of Jesus's letter to the church in Smyrna is to teach Christ's church how to overcome when tribulation becomes its fiercest. God, probably through the ministry of the Apostle Paul, had graciously rescued souls from his wrath in Smyrna. Together they became the church in that city. Although there were many factors from a worldly perspective to make Smyrna a wonderful city, it was not a welcome place for these believers in Christ. And Jesus lets them know that their circumstances were not about to improve but get worse. He does not tell them to get out of the city but to remain there. And he comes to them to undergird their endurance even though it may mean death. And we will learn that the way to overcome the fiercest tribulation is no different from overcoming when tribulation is not as great.

## **I. The Approaching Storm of Tribulation**

A. The situation in Smyrna was bad for Christ's followers. Just as Jesus says to each of the seven churches, he says to the church in Smyrna, "I know." Jesus was not unaware of the hostility that assaulted the church there. He says, "I know your tribulation and your poverty and the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not." Three words mark the conditions which faced the Christians of Smyrna—tribulation, poverty, and slander.

Tribulation. According to James Montgomery Boice, the word refers to "the crushing pressure that is used to extract the juice from grapes or to separate grain from its husks at threshing time. It does not denote mere trouble; it refers to cruel, relentless, grinding pressure." There is a such a pressure that is growing in our own culture. Certainly the cruelty we experience is not even close to the degree that is experienced in many other places on our planet, but the pressure is real and it is on the rise.

Far, far more crushing was the tribulation that gripped the Smyrna church. All the rest of the city flocked to the numerous temples to worship the emperor along with various other gods and goddesses. The citizenry found the refusal of Christians to join them reprehensible. The social pressure was enormous, and there were consequences for failing to conform.

One of those consequences was POVERTY. The word Jesus uses to describe the economic state of the church in Smyrna refers to abject poverty. It asserts NOT that they barely had enough but that they had nothing at all. The Christians in Smyrna were the economic dregs of society.

The third mark of the Smyrna church was slander. Remember that a large contingent of Jews had located to Smyrna. Those Jews were smearing the good name of the Christians. They held true to the form they had exhibited as Paul was spreading the gospel on his missionary journeys. They were constantly stirring up mobs and accusing the Christians of being reprehensible troublemakers and acting against the decrees of Caesar. Jesus had straight up informed the Pharisees in Palestine that they were of their father the devil. He indicates the same to be true of the Jews of Smyrna. They were a synagogue of Satan. They had rejected their own Messiah with a vengeance and now their hostility was being unleashed in the form of slander against those who followed him.

Today in Pakistan where Christians make up only 1.6% of the population, nearly 80% of "sewer sweepers" are Christians. A recent ad for more such workers indicated that only Christians should apply. It is humiliating and disgusting work to dive down into the sludge and clean blockages of human waste and the pay is meager. The Muslims call them "dirty" and doctors refuse to treat them. They are the off-scouring of society living in squalor and poverty because they are Christians. That's how it was for the followers of Christ in Smyrna.

B. Bad as things were, they were about to become even worse. We might imagine or even hope that for this church under such enormous pressure that Jesus might address a letter to them to tell them it would not last much longer or that things would get better soon since they have suffered so. Instead Jesus tells them that things are about to become even more difficult. They are about to suffer even more. Some are about to be thrown into prison. Now make sure you do not let the modern image of an American prison take over your imagination. Roman prisons were places of filth, discomfort, foul air, and little if any sustenance. You would almost rather die than be put there. And being there meant you were awaiting trial to determine whether or not to put you to death. No doubt some of the Smyrna believers were about to give their lives. The imprisonment would be for ten days. It would be a definite period and yet it would come to an end.

C. The Tribulation was coming from the devil. HE was about to throw Christians into prison. Satan's hostility was channeled through the hostility of the ethnic Jews. Jesus called them not God's chosen people but a synagogue of Satan. If you reject Jesus as Messiah, you are on the side of the devil. If you embrace Jesus as Messiah, you need to know that Jesus's enemy is also your enemy. Peter calls him your adversary. He despises you, and his one chief aim is to take you down. He wants you to deny Christ as Peter did. He wants you to turn from Christ. And he will use threats

and intimidation and tribulation and temptation to try to do so. You and I have got to understand this! We are in a battle every day. The enemy never rests. Neither should we. We must suit up every day with the whole armor of God. Truth, righteousness, the gospel, faith, salvation, the sword of the Spirit, and prayer are our defense and our weapons. We must engage with them every day.

D. A very clear lesson stands out in this warning of the approaching storm. It is one that we need to learn. Here it is: Faithfulness to Christ does not promise easier times ahead in this life. The prevailing mindset of most people, and that includes most Christians, is that if you live right, good things will happen. If you do good, then you should expect a reward. Things will be easier; life will go more smoothly; circumstances will be more comfortable. But this is not the testimony of the Scripture! For example, Paul wrote the Thessalonian believers recalling how they had suffered from their own countrymen what the churches in Judea suffered from the Jews. He wrote: "For you yourselves know that we are destined for [affliction]. For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass" (1 Thess. 3:3-4).

Some of you might wish that I would not belabor this point. You would like to think or even hope to have an easy life without suffering and affliction. But that would be a disservice to you. You see, this time in this life is not about experiencing luxury and comfort and ease. It is about dying. Daily Christ calls us not to indulge ourselves but to deny ourselves. We are daily called to die, to take up a cross and follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Life is not a vacation cruise but a war, and we need a war mentality if we are to endure for the glory of God.

## **II. The Essence of Endurance**

There is a reason Jesus warns the disciples in Smyrna that the hard times are going to become harder. He does not want them to be complacent. He does not want them to be surprised but to be prepared and ready in order to endure. And he gives them two directives.

A. First, he says "Do not fear what you are about to suffer." Then he says, "Be faithful unto death." What does Jesus mean? "I am telling you that as bad as things are, they are going to get worse and you are about to be thrown into the dreaded and detested prison. Some of you will die, and yet I am saying, 'do not fear what you are about to suffer?'"

B. If we think back to the Garden of Gethsemane and Jesus's anticipation of the cross, we observe how he sweat drops of blood, how he sought if possible some other way. He dreaded the cross and the wrath and I believe it gives us some insight as to what he is saying here. When Jesus tells the church not to fear but to be faithful, it is not an enticement to blindly sing zippity-doo-dah and go off as there is no threat and no pain. It is instruction to not be overcome by the fear of what looms before them so that they turn away from faithfulness to Christ.

Melissa and I were in Florida last week and we took a canoe trip down a river. You need to know that in the first place Melissa is very uneasy about being on any water in a canoe. But you also need to know that the river we were canoeing is in the heart of alligator land. They tell you as you are about to embark that you will see alligators on the trip and there are snakes and there are no refunds of rental fees. In fact before getting in the canoe we watched a snake swimming in the river right there about 10 feet from us! All of those factors motivate fear and would mitigate against my wife paddling down the Wekiva River with me. To say she wasn't hesitant; to say she wasn't afraid would not be correct. But ultimately you could say that she did not fear because she DID go down the river with me!! We did see alligators but we did return safely.

One pastor rightly says, "Fearlessness is not primarily the total absence of dread. It is rather the refusal to succumb to intimidation. It does not mean no sweaty palms or that knees will not knock together or that your stomach will not churn. Rather it means that the threat will not turn you away from faithfulness and allegiance to Jesus Christ."

B. Testing for ten days calls to mind the ten day test of Daniel and his friends when they came to Babylon where Nebuchadnezzar considered himself a god. They were assigned a daily portion of the food that the king ate, but they resolved that they would not defile themselves with it. Nor would they give testimony of absolute loyalty to the king by eating his food. So they asked for vegetables and water. After ten days on their diet they were even better in appearance than the youths who ate the king's food. God puts his people to the test, but he will hold us fast and he will bless us through it all, even if it costs us our earthly lives. So fear not; be faithful even unto death. How do we do that? Jesus shows us how.

### **III. The Key to Overcoming**

The key to overcoming is to keep our eyes on who Jesus is and our ears on what he says.

A. We need to notice the great emphasis Jesus places here on who He is. He is speaking to the church there in striking terms about who he is. Look at verse 8. The words he speaks to the church are "the words of the first and the last, who died and came to life." The risen Lord is the one who is speaking. You know how powerful the resurrection of Jesus is. It really is the declaration of God that we must listen to his Son. But it says more than simply that he is powerful and able to overcome death. The resurrection declares that his death matters! Jesus is reminding the Smyrnians that he is the gospel. He is the good news to sinners. The death he died he died to sin. Jesus died bearing the penalty of sin due to sinners, but he by his death put the curse of sin away for those who come to trust in him. By sending his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, God condemned sin in the flesh in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us for whom he died. There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Having been raised, he now lives to God in behalf of everyone who trusts in him.

This is the gospel, and if you have not by faith embraced this gospel and this savior, he is being lifted up before you right now that you might believe and from him might receive the forgiveness of God.

But there is more here than just a gospel presentation. Jesus is communicating powerfully to the Smyrna church that he holds so much more for them than does the city in which they dwell. Remember the city tagline? Smyrna—the first and great city of Asia. It was also the city that had died but had been raised again. The citizens of Smyrna were quite proud of their city. It was the first. It was the best. But, says Jesus, do not give your allegiance to this city. It may call itself the first, but Jesus says truly, "I am the FIRST AND the LAST." "Indeed I died but I came to life again." I am the one who has truly risen from the dead. I was not merely devastated; I went into death for you and I am alive forever more. Believe me. Trust me. Follow me. Never let me go. This is the one who is speaking to his church. The city is saying "you must give allegiance to Caesar," but Jesus says, "No, you must give allegiance to me." And his loyal followers will say, "Yes, Jesus, this city does not hold a candle to your glory."

B. Now let's consider what He says.

1. Notice first His clarification. Everything around the Smyrna church said that they were in abject poverty. But what did Jesus say? He said they may seem poor but the truth is they were rich.

Jesus knows the nature of true riches. In the sermon on the mount he counseled people to lay up treasures not on earth where moth and rust destroy but to store up treasure in heaven. He counseled the rich young ruler to give it all away and choose to have treasure in heaven. What the world loves is passing away. What heaven loves is here to stay. The truest riches are those that last forever. The essence of those riches is God himself. The Smyrna church may have looked poor, but their riches outstripped those of the fair city in which they dwelled by the measure of worth and eternity. In essence Jesus reminds the Smyrna church to keep their eyes off of the deceitfulness of worldly riches and on the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

2. The second thing Jesus says provides important instruction. The devil will test you for ten days. Whatever else this point means, it declares that the devil's testing is temporary. The testing may be incredibly intense, but it will last for only a short time. Endure by remembering that the test will come to an end under the sovereign hand of Jesus. Remember with Paul that "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us."

3. Third, Jesus speaks His promise. He says, "Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life." Oh Jesus promises so much more than this world. Smyrna was famous for its crown. The crown of Smyrna was the beautiful construction atop Mt Pagos overlooking the Aegean Sea. To be affirmed and loved by this city and its citizens is what it could offer those who would bow and proclaim Caesar as Lord. But Jesus, the true Lord, offers so much more. He gives those whose tested allegiance is to him the crown of life. It is life in the city whose builder and architect is God himself. Smyrna may be first in Asia, but it will not last. And it is not true life. True life is to know God and be in fellowship with him. And that is the promise for those who remain faithful to Christ, who choose Jesus over this world.

4. Finally, Christ speaks assurance. He says, "The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death." The second death is depicted in Revelation 20 as an eternal existence in the lake of unquenchable fire. Anyone whose name is not written in the book of life is thrown there, where torment is ongoing forever and ever. The assurance of Jesus for those who remain faithful to him is that the second death is not a threat to them. His assurance recalls what he had said when physically present on earth. "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both body and soul in hell" (Matthew 10:28).

## **Conclusion**

The Christian life is a life of martyrdom. We may or may not have to literally die for the cause of Christ, but we are called to die to self by living for Christ. I like the way one pastor put it: "Being a Christian is the very act of embracing martyrdom in daily doses of self-denying obedience." If you wonder whether you would have the faith to die for the cause of Christ, I think you would get a good idea by looking at how you live for him.

## **Prayer**

## **Benediction**

May we like Christ himself die to ourselves. May we willingly embrace the first death that we may receive a far more glorious crown than the crown of Smyrna, the crown of life, the recipients of which need have no fear of the second death. And to him who is "the First AND the LAST, who died and came to life, be glory, majesty, dominion and power before all time and now and forever. A-men.

