

DATE: November 6, 2011

TEXT: Revelation 2: 8-11

TITLE: The Suffering of Christians



We are now moving on to the second church that is the recipient of the letter from the Apostle John. Last week we looked at Ephesus and saw a church that has lost its first love. This week we are looking at Smyrna. Smyrna is unique in the list in that it has no negative. Jesus had only positive words for this church. Smyrna is often called the “suffering church”

Suffering will be the theme of my sermon.... but allow me to look go down some other interesting side roads before we look at this central theme.

Side road # 1 I will share a quick look at the city of Smyrna. It was located 35 miles north of Ephesus. It is also on a very natural harbor of the Aegean Sea. It was called the “first city of Asia” because of its beauty and importance. Although Paul never traveled to Smyrna, Christians from Ephesus probably founded the church between his 2nd and 3rd missionary journeys. It was led by a very important Bishop in the early 2nd century named Polycarp. It also had one of the largest and most influential Jewish populations in all of Asia.

It still exists today, but has changed its name to Izmir. It still has a beautiful harbor and port. It still has a large Jewish population. It has a small Christian population that is still heavily persecuted.

Side Road # 2 Notice the wonderful picture of Jesus. *Rev. 2: 8 says...*

8 “To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.

Again we see the centrality of Jesus Christ in this book. Jesus is called the “First and the last.” This is a term of authority. Jesus is saying “Yes, you have numerous authorities in your life... you have the Roman Govt. You have family authority.... but I am the ultimate and the absolute authority.”

That is certainly still true today. We have authority of the US Govt. We obey it and we respect it. But we understand this... Jesus is the authority in our lives. We understand that the U.S. Supreme court does not give the truth about abortion....or about marriage.... or about morality....or truthfully about anything. Jesus is our authority.

Yes, we certainly respect the authority of our schools.... but we understand, by law, they

can not include religious truths. Kim is teaching a 7th grade class right now. It is required of all 7th graders. It includes civic lessons on proper behavior and conduct. She came home last week and told me she had given a survey on cheating. The vast majority of the kids said if they were sure they would not get caught they of course would cheat. “Why,” she asked. Because their goal was to get a good grade in the class... not necessarily to learn.... that’s the teachers goal not the kids... and cheating helps them to achieve this primarily goal. Of course Kim taught how this was wrong... but she said to me. ... “From their moral base, and their honest statement of their goal... cheating is logical... Without faith in a higher level of accountability there is no changing their moral base or their goals.” Jesus is the source of Truth.

Side Road # 3 Notice the clear words of Jesus that a religious body, if then do not maintain the truth, can become a tool of Satan. *Rev 2: 9 states...*

9 I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

The Church of Jesus Christ has been given a great responsibility. The Church has the responsibility of maintaining and sharing the truth of Jesus Christ. In Smyrna we see that the

Jewish population had rejected the truth of Jesus Christ... and had actively persecuted the Christians. They were turning the Christians over to the Romans to be put to death. Jesus is clear... by their rejection of truth and by their evil actions they were tools of Satan.

The lesson for us is this... We are in a spiritual battle. Satan desires to twist truth. Satan continues to try to destroy the church... through persecution... and through deception. Christians are still heavily persecuted... and the church is easily deceived today. Jesus is “the way the truth and the life”... no one come to the Father except through him.

I am going to now look at the topic of suffering. Our text teaches us 3 lesson on suffering.

Lesson # 1 Christian do indeed suffer... as a matter of fact Christians at times suffer more than non-Christians. Again *Rev. 2: 9 states...*

9 I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich!

Afflictions means persecutions... imprisonment... and death. Poverty means extreme poverty. If you were a Christian in the city of Smyrna... the economic powers... the Romans and the Jews... refused to hire or sell to you. The poverty was great.

I want to tell two stories to make this point. When my children were in Junior High, my wife and I considered going into the Mission Field. We decided to take our family and spend a month in Bolivia. Bolivia is officially a catholic country. But you need to understand this... Catholicism in Bolivia and in much of Central and South America is very different from Catholicism in North America and Europe. When the European conquerors went to the new world they demanded that the native people convert to Christianity or die. Most converted.... in name, but brought their old religion into Catholicism. The gods of the Incas and the Aztecs and many other religions were incorporated into Christianity. "The Day of the Dead" became as big as Christmas. Saints and especially Mary became representatives of the old religion. This is still true today.

In Bolivia a great renewal and revival swept the county in the 70's and 80's. Evangelical Christianity quickly spread. However the official church was very much against this. Evangelical Christians were economically shunned. Bolivia is the 2nd poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.... behind only Haiti. When we were there Evangelicals Christians tended

to be very, very poor... the poorest of the poor. I believe it is better today... the Evangelical Christians have become so numerous the persecution is less... but still they remain the poorest section of the country.

A second historical illustration: As I said in my introduction, the Bishop of Smyrna was Polycarp. You take classes on Polycarp in Seminary. We know this about Polycarp, on February 23rd, 155 A.D. in Smyrna, Polycarp was arrested by the Romans as arranged by the Jewish population.

He stood before the proconsul who demanded that he curse Jesus and offer allegiance of Caesar. Polycarp said... and I quote

Eighty and six years have I served him (notice this puts him in Smyrna during the time of John in Ephesus) and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me. You threaten me with fire that burns for a time, and is quickly quenched, for you do not know the fire which awaits the wicked in the judgement to come in everlasting punishment. Why are you waiting? Come, do what you will.

He was, of course tied to a stake to be burned. He offered up a wonderful prayer... which we also have word for word, and was put to death.

We are Christians. We still suffer from cancers. We still suffer from the death of loved

ones. We still suffer from persecution. We still suffer tragic deaths from drunken drivers. The sinfulness of humanity and the attacks of Satan continue to touch our lives.

Notice our text is clear... even Jesus suffered death. Even Jesus suffered the death of loved ones. Even Jesus suffered great pain. Even Jesus was betrayed by his friends. If Jesus suffered can we expect anything different?

Lesson # 2 The promise of Jesus is this... the suffering will be short lived *Rev. 2:10 states*

10 Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown.

Jesus is saying, “**yes you will suffer... it will even increase... but it will be short lived.**” Ten days is a symbolic number meaning a short time. Truthfully we do not know if the imprisonment ended in their release or their death... truthfully death is more likely... but it was an end to their suffering.

I will share a personal story. Last Monday Grace Marie Elmer was born. What a joy. People have said “Congratulations on your first granddaughter.” And we thank you for your words. But Kim and I do believe we have 3 grand daughters. Kate and Ava were born and died

the same day. (I am not able to go into great details) We believe when we get to heaven we will be greeted by two little girls. The time of grief... that still continues today... will be short lived compared to the eternity together.

The promise of Jesus is that our time of suffering will be short compared to our eternity in His presence.

Finally lesson # 3 Overcomers will never die. *Rev. 2:11 states...*

11 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.

What is this second death? *Rev 20: 14 tells us...*

13 The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. 14 Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death

The second death is the eternal casting out of the presence of God. Yes, we will experience death... but no we will live forever in the presence of Jesus Christ. We are the overcomers. We are victorious.

Yes, we will suffer. Yes we will face physical death... but let us be like the church at Smyrna.... commended for our faithfulness in face of suffering. We are his forever. AMEN