

LET THE BIBLE SPEAK SERIES

Ronny F. Wade, Speaker

Letter To The Church at Smyrna

Smyrna was located about forty miles north of Ephesus on a rather long gulf with two excellent harbors. It was second only to Ephesus in exports. It was a beautiful city, being surrounded by rolling hills and groves of trees. Some referred to it as the most beautiful city under the sun. Its well-paved streets led past stately buildings and temples. Its acropolis on Mt. Pagas gave the appearance of a crown, which became the symbol of the city. Smyrna became an ally of Rome early in the period of Roman conquest, and as a result enjoyed great prosperity for years. Located here was a shrine to Roma, the Roman goddess, erected by the city as a sign of her fidelity to the empire. There were also temples to Cybele and Zeus, making Smyrna a center of pagan worship. The city claimed to be the first city in Asia: first in beauty, first in literature, first in loyalty to Rome. Smyrna still exists today under the modern name of Izmir, Turkey, second only in importance to Ankara.

The origin of the church in this city is unknown, this being the only mention of the city or church in the New Testament.

One of its most notable members was Polycarp, who served as one of its bishops. About A.D. 167 the Roman powers decided they were going to force this man to renounce Christ and worship the Roman emperor or be put to death.

Learning of this, he was advised by close friends to leave the city, whereupon he traveled about four miles out into the country to the home of one of the members of the church.

Herod, the chief of police, learned of this and went him to the place where he was staying. He knocked on the door and said "I am here for Polycarp. I am going to arrest him and take him back Smyrna." Polycarp came out and was forced by Herod into a chariot and the trip back to Smyrna began. During the journey the Chief told him "when we get to the theatre in Smyrna, if you will deny Jesus Christ to be Lord and God and will confess the Roman emperor as Lord and God, you will live. If you refuse you will die." When they arrived the blood-thirsty mob cried "the Christians to the lions." Lifting his right hand, the crowd silenced, and Polycarp said in a firm voice "Eighty and six years have I served Him and I will not deny him now." To which the mob responded "Polycarp to the lions".

By then the sun had already set over the beautiful hills of Asia Minor. The law of Rome closed the lions dens at sunset. What would they do with Polycarp? But one thing was left. They would burn him at the stake. Placing him at the stake they began to tie him. He said "don't tie me. He who has stood by me through all these years, will stand by me now." As the sparks went upward the spirit of Polycarp took its flight to God, and his ashes went down to the earth from whence they had come.

Polycarp was more alive that day than he had ever been. The story of his death spread throughout the Roman world. It is no surprise that Tertullian in the second century wrote that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.

It is unlikely that any of us will ever be tried in such a fashion as this.

These things saith the first and last, who was dead, and lived again.

Because Smyrna claimed to be first and had no rival, the Lord introduces himself to this church as the first and the last. An indication that his primacy must be recognized by all.

The Lord must always be first. Mt.6:33 "Seek ye first..."

The first commandment "thou shalt love the lord thy God with all thine heart..."

The church should be first in our lives.

The Lord should be first when we select a companion for marriage.

The Lord and church should be first when we give of our means. 1Cor.16:1-2

Imagine sitting in this congregation when this letter is read for the first time. When these Christians hear these words they no doubt think of their neighbors, business associates, and fellow laborers, who claimed that Rome was eternal.

But here the Lord declares that it is not Rome, not the Roman emperors, not the Roman Senate, but it is the Lord Jesus who is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, and what's more he was dead and now alive forever more.

A terrible blow to the supremacy of Rome and Caesar.

I know thy tribulation, and thy poverty (but thou art rich), and the blasphemy of them that say they are Jews, and they are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

The Lord knew the lot of these people who were suffering because of their faith. Nothing is hidden from him. Tribulation comes from a word describing the tramping of sugar cane to make molasses. The tramping of the feet was the tribulation of the cane. The persecution these people faced was intense and severe.

They were poor. Probably because, they came from a poorer class of people and also because their loyalty to the Lord would bring them into direct conflict with the paganism of this heathen city, resulting in reprisals from the authorities.

Their poverty was offset, however, by a far greater wealth than silver or gold could offer. They were rich in faith, good works, and favor with God. Heavenly citizenship brings abundant blessings. "Hearken ye beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him?" (James 2:5)

1 Timothy 6:10 "They that would be rich..."

"Hardly shall a rich man enter the kingdom of heaven..."

So many of God's people down through the years fit this pattern. Poor, but blessed.

"The common people heard him gladly..."

An additional burden borne by these Christians was the persecution from the Jews. The Jews had a long history of persecuting the church. They crucified the Lord. They persecuted Paul. And now these Asian counterparts blaspheme the Christians of Smyrna. They railed against these people.

They were not true Jews, that is God's Israel who had been circumcised in heart, who worship God in spirit and truth. Instead they were a synagogue belonging to Satan. The opposition of these Jews was a work of Satan through his emissaries.

Satan works through people: Used Eve to get to Adam, used Job's wife in an attempt to get him to curse God.

Fear not the things which thou art about to suffer: behold, the devil is about to cast some of you in prison, that ye may be tried; and shall have tribulation ten days. Be thou faithful unto death and I will give thee a crown of life."

These Christians are encouraged remain faithful and not retreat from the tribulation and problems facing them. Suffering lay ahead for them. Easy for us to read and talk about such things, but it would be very difficult to heed the admonition given in this verse. We today are relatively free from such suffering and persecution.

The devil was behind the evil they would face. He is the:

Accuser of the brethren---Rev.12:9-10

Sifts God's people as wheat--- Luke 22:31

Oppresses by physical suffering--- Acts 10:38

Seeks whom he may devour---1Peter 5:8

Our enemy---Mt. 13:19

Father of lies---John 8:44

Prince of devils---Mark 3:33

They would be tried in the sense that their faith would be tested. When faith is tested, there would be an attempt by the Devil to get them to deny the Lord.

The ten days refer to a period of time, not ten literal days. Whether short or long, it would come to an end. The Lord knew the length of the period but did not reveal it.

Be faithful unto death---hold onto the Lord and do not deny the faith.. The idea is not "be faithful until you die," even though that is necessary, but "be faithful even to the point of dying for the Lord."

A crown of life. A crown of flowers was worn by the pagan worshiper, a crown adorned the patron goddess, as indicated on the coins of the city, and the city had a crown of buildings on the crown-shaped acropolis of Mt. Pagas.

All this is nothing compared to the crown of life to be given to the victorious child of God.

An incorruptible crown---1Cor. 9:25

The crown of righteousness---2Tim. 4:8

The crown of life---James 1:12

The crown of glory that fadeth not away---1Peter 5:4

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches. He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.

What is promised to and expected of the church at Smyrna applies to all churches then and now.

No greater promise could be given: These people entering a period of severe persecution are told that if they overcome they shall not be hurt of the second death. That is they would not be lost.

Only two alternatives: Crown of life--eternal life or second death.

Second death has no power over the victor---Rev. 20:6

Second death is lake of fire---Rev. 20:14

Second death is destiny of wicked---Rev. 21:8

The Lord did not utter any words of criticism or condemnation of this suffering church, offering only his love and encouragement, Proof that Jesus really does care when we are burdened and tried. He sees and knows. He was tempted in all points like we are, yet without sin. He was persecuted, oppressed, tried, and finally killed. He knew what these people were going through.