

Letter to Smyrna
Revelation 2:8-11

Introduction

Smyrna was 35 miles north of Ephesus and was a great rival. Of all the cities of the Asia Province, Smyrna was the loveliest. It was a city of brightness and activity. It had a fine harbour and attracted much trade. It was known as “the glory of Asia” because it was so beautiful. Although founded 1000 years before, in the first century it was a model of town planning with its straight spacious streets, the most famous of which was Golden Street. There were many famous and magnificent temples to various Greek gods, and a famous library and stadium, and the largest public theatre in the province. Smyrna was an important political city and an assize town. It was the birthplace of the Greek poet Homer, and culture and the arts flourished there.

The citizens were totally loyal to the Roman Emperor, and there was civic pride in its importance, wealth and grandeur. Unlike Ephesus, Smyrna is not in ruins today, and is still a large and beautiful city of 250,000 people, making it the second largest city in Asiatic Turkey. It is now called Izmir, and in 1952 it held the South East Headquarters of NATO. To this day half of the city claim to be Christians, and it is a great centre of the Orthodox Church for learning and piety.

The letter to the church at Smyrna contains unqualified praise. We are not certain when the Gospel arrived in Smyrna. It could have been during Paul’s third missionary journey, for we are told **All who dwelt in Asia heard the Word of the Lord** (Acts 19:10). The Christians must have been tempted to feel inferior and ashamed, for they were few in number, and their worship was so mean and poor and unimpressive compared with the magnificence of heathen worship and marvellous buildings. Also they were in great danger. They were soon to find out that it was much more dangerous being a Christian in Smyrna than in other places.

This message came to the suffering church in Smyrna, assuring them that the Head of the Church knew all that was going on, and that they were going through these things for His sake. He tells them something about suffering to give them more comfort and reassurance.

The suffering which they bore

Nowhere was safe for Christians in the first century. The period of persecution we read about in Acts went on for 300 years. But Smyrna was especially dangerous. These Christians had not lost their first love, unlike those at Ephesus, and had inwardly and outwardly stayed true to the Lord. So trouble was only a matter of time.

The first problem was that the Roman Emperor was not only respected by the people of Smyrna, but they worshipped him as a god. This worship went on all over Asia, but more so in Smyrna than anywhere else. It had started gradually, but by the time Revelation was being written, Emperor Domitian had made it compulsory. Once a year every Roman citizen had to burn a pinch of incense on an altar as an act of

worship to Caesar. Then he was given a certificate to say his religious duty had been performed. After he had completed this, he was free to worship whom ever he wished. It was not a religious act at all, but a political gesture, a means of uniting all states, races, languages and cities. Refusal to do so was taken as treason and disloyalty, and meant suspicion and trouble.

Here was the Christians' problem. They could not perform this act. They could not say, "Caesar is lord", burn the incense and get their certificate. Although they were loyal citizens, they would not compromise on the truth that only Jesus is Lord. Informers were numerous, and the authorities soon found out who were not complying with the Emperor's wishes. So the Christians were on a collision course with the authorities. The church in Smyrna was a place for heroes.

The second problem for the Christians in Smyrna was that there were plenty of Jews in the city too, and they were also very hostile. The Jews were given an exemption from Caesar worship, but they encouraged pagan worship by informing on the Christians. One example was Bishop Polycarp who, in 155, was betrayed to the persecutors by his slave who collapsed under torture. The captors pleaded with Polycarp to say, "Caesar is lord" to save himself, but he replied, "Eighty and six years have I served Him and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my king who has saved me?" It was decided he would be burnt to death. The Jews even broke the Sabbath law to bring wood for the fire.

There were five forms of suffering mentioned here.

- (1) **I know your afflictions** (Revelation 2:9). The word used here is pressure, and was used for a man being tortured to death by being crushed with a boulder till the life went out of him. We may not face this particular threat, but we do know the pressure of worry, circumstances and opposition till we wonder how much more we can take.
- (2) **I know your poverty**. There are two Greek words for poverty, one which means not having enough for luxuries, and the other – which is the one used here – means absolute destitution. These Christians were poor for a number of reasons. In some cases, it was because they were generous in giving away what they had, they did not cheat in business, some pagans would not trade with them, some would not give them employment, some had their homes pillaged because they were Christians. So today, it does not always pay to be a Christian. For some, poverty may be the cost of Christian discipleship.
- (3) **I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan**. Some of those saying they were Jews were really people of Satan, for he is a liar and the father of lies. They spread lies, rumours and slander, and poisoned minds. Slander is not easy to bear. The Christians were deeply wounded, for it is not easy to take being misrepresented.
- (4) **The devil will put some of you in prison to test you** (Revelation 2:10). Christians had been imprisoned in other places too, like Jerusalem, Philippi and Rome. But they knew God's presence even in prison. The daughter of William Booth was in a Swiss prison when she wrote the words: "*Best beloved of my soul, I am here alone with Thee, And my prison is a heaven, since Thou sharest it with me.*"

- (5) **Be faithful, even to the point of death.** Stephen was not the only Christian martyr. Paul was beheaded as a martyr, Peter was crucified, and Polycarp, and many others down the centuries.

That is what was involved in being a Christian in Smyrna in the first century – and it has been the experience of many others since. The New Testament makes it clear that this is our lot as Christians. **If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also (John 15:18-20). For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him (Philippians 1:29).**

Luther said that suffering is one of the marks of a true church. Persecution has been there in every generation simply because the world hates God and resists Christ's claims. Fear of the world causes us to try to avoid it by compromise, and so our lives are not very different from others and we are not a challenge to unbelievers. This is the reason why many churches make little impact on the unsaved. They opt to mind their own business, to soft-pedal certain subjects and water down unpalatable truths, when in fact they should offend and embarrass others.

The church at Smyrna is a rebuke to us. It was clear, uncompromising and unbending. That does not mean it was offensive, rude or foolish. But though gracious and wise, there was no doubt whose they were and who they served. Their commitment was never half-hearted. And so it was a suffering church. But with the call to suffer came the promise of sustaining grace. God's demands are always matched by His promises.

The comforts by which they were supported

Christ's command was clear. **Be faithful** (Revelation 2:11). Jesus spoke the same words to Jairus, **Don't be afraid, just believe** (Mark 5:36). When we trust Him, we find Him trustworthy; when we have faith in Him, He is faithful. This short letter contains seven truths about God that help our faith to grow as we feed on them.

- (1) He is eternal. **Him who is the First and the Last** (Revelation 2:8). **I am the Alpha and the Omega** (Revelation 1:8). **Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever** (Hebrews 13:8). In the midst of all that happens to us, He is the same. *"His love in time past forbids me to think, He will leave me at last in trouble to sink."*
- (2) He is victorious. **He who died and came to life again** (Revelation 2:8). He conquered the last enemy. Let the world do its worst – the Christian is safe. Death has no terror for us. **Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil— and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death** (Hebrews 2:14,15).
- (3) He is all knowing. **I know your afflictions... I know the slander** (Revelation 2:9). When we are going through trouble, we may feel we are on our own, but the fact that the Lord knows should be a great comfort. He knows, He sympathises, He understands, and so we can unburden everything before Him.

- (4) He is reassuring. **I know your poverty – yet you are rich** (Revelation 2:9). The Christian's values are different from the world's. Materially we may be poor, but spiritually very rich. Treasure in heaven is of more value than treasure on earth. **Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal** (Matthew 6:19). But treasure in heaven is more secure. It is guaranteed to be there when we arrive. *“When you look at others with their land or gold, Think that Christ has promised you His wealth untold.”* **Lord Jesus Christ, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich** (2 Corinthians 8:9).
- (5) He is in control. **You will suffer persecution for ten days** (Revelation 2:10). They would suffer, but it would be carefully measured out. There would be deliverance from suffering. All was planned beforehand, and was in God's hands. He allowed suffering to go so far, and no further. As He had cared for Job, and the kingdom of Judah, He knows how much we can stand and will not allow us to take more than we can endure. Hence we can be calm amid the sorrows and evils of life.
- (6) He is purposeful. **Some of you in prison to test you** (Revelation 2:10). God permits suffering, not to destroy us but to refine us. Suffering strengthens faith and deepens experience and equips us to support others.
- (7) He is generous. **I will give you the crown of life.. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death** (Revelation 2:10,11). The Christian will escape hell and will receive a rich reward. Heaven is like the winning post at the end of a race. The victor will get a garland of eternal life. He will look back with relief and triumph, glad to be on the Lord's side. Life has not been without problems, but so worthwhile. The end will be glorious.

Conclusion

This letter is relevant to us all. If we are true to the Lord, we will suffer. But still we must be faithful and never fear. Take heart, for He is eternal, victorious, all-knowing, reassuring, in control and generous. Take the long-term view.