

The Suffering Church
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Revelation 2:8-11: “And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, ‘These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life: “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. 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. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.’””

Smyrna was located 35 miles north of Ephesus. It was an ancient city dating back to the year 1000 B.C. It had been leveled by wars but was again rebuilt by General Lycemicus, one of the four generals who served Alexander the Great. He restored it to such greatness that the citizens of Smyrna boasted that they had died but come to life again. Smyrna was by far considered the most beautiful city in all Asia Minor. The design of the city was splendid, from the Mediterranean Sea you would ascend up through the city to Mount Pagus where atop the mount was a beautifully designed building that caused the mount to take on the appearance of a great crown. Those of Smyrna affectionately called that mount, “the crown of Smyrna, the crown of life.”

It was also the birth place of Homer and the location of emperor worship. In Smyrna, the Roman emperors were first worshipped as gods and the personification of the gods were called caesars. It was here in Smyrna where the crowds first proclaimed, “Caesar is lord.” In fact, they killed people who didn't worship Caesar. Each year every citizen had to burn incense on Caesar's altar after which he was issued a certificate. To be without a certificate was to risk discovery and the death penalty.

Today, Smyrna goes by the name Izmir. It's in Turkey and is home to some 300,000 people. Note this: Ephesus is gone, it left its first love; but there are still Christians in Smyrna today. Smyrna gets its name from its chief export, a balm-like spice or perfume that is extracted from a tree called myrrh. Check this out: myrrh had to be crushed in order to give out its fragrance. Can you see how Jesus put His identifying marks on this church?

Revelation 2:8 [“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, ‘These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life ...’”] Smyrna was the place that the worship of the emperors began. It was the place that first proclaimed Caesar as Lord. But Jesus says, “I am the First and the Last.” Don’t worry about people and their titles. Jesus has the first and the last say in everything that will happen in your life. **Matthew 10:28** reads “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”

He then goes on to say “... who was dead and came to life.” His identity to them is vital for their spiritual growth because His death brings them life and it shows them the power of the God they believe in. Has there been a time in your life when you have suffered and experienced hardship? Have you wondered, “is there anybody who understands what I am going through?” Jesus understands, and He wants the church in Smyrna as well as the churches of today to see Him as one who suffered. Yet in His suffering there was a purpose. **Isaiah 53:1-10** says “Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him. He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace *was* upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; he was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth. He was taken from prison and from judgment, and who will declare His generation? For He was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgressions of my people He was stricken. And they made His grave with the wicked—But with the rich at His death, because He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in His mouth. Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief. When You make His soul an offering for sin, He shall see His seed, He shall prolong His days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in His hand.”

Verse 9 – “I know your works.”

Not only does Jesus understand our persecution and suffering, He is the key to our victory over tribulations. **Matthew 5:11-12** exhorts “Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Think about this, guys: There is no mention of condemnation towards this church, no discussion about sin, and nothing said about punishment. Why? Because this church has been purged; it has been purged through the matter of suffering.

Verse 9 – I know your works, in tribulation. **2 Corinthians 4:7-11**: “ But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed—always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus’ sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.”

Through tribulation and persecution, they were holding up the light of Christ; they were showing the world their treasure. Look at it this way: Persecutions, trials, tribulations, and suffering will always destroy false faith.

People, no one is going to give their back or their life for something they don’t believe in.

But those same things will strengthen true faith. In his book, *The Fight*, author John White writes, “Tough times either make you or break you, if you are not utterly crushed by them you will be enlarged by them. The pain will make you live more deeply for God, and expand your consciousness.” **Philippians 3:10**: “I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death ...”

Verse 9 – “I know your works in poverty, but you are rich.”

This describes the time when churches were hated, outlawed, and persecuted. Instead of worshipping in a magnificent building, they gathered together in caves, catacombs, and other hidden places. They even had to post men on look-out to warn them of the approach of their foes. Back then, God called the poor church rich, but today He calls the rich church poor.

Look around today, guys. How many congregations possess great brick structures, beautifully furnished, and with equipment sufficient to compete with the world in providing amusement and entertainment? Yet without the touch of God, it is all dead. **James 2:5** reads “Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?”

2 Corinthians 6:10 [“... as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.”] This is Paul speaking about those who minister to God as poor yet making many rich. If a poor person could only give you the gospel of Christ, that alone should make you rich, and that’s what the testimony of this church should do for us.

Verse 9 – “But you are rich.”

When Jesus said this to them, He was telling them that they had invested wisely in eternal things. Jesus said, “I know you works through tribulation. I know your works in poverty.”

Then He says, “I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews and are not.”

Matthew 15:19: “For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies.”

In the English Standard version of the Bible (ESV), it says “slander” instead of “blasphemy,” and that’s the context of that word right here.

So why were they being slandered by these hypocritical Jews?

Two things:

1. Most Christians were originally Jews during that time and place.
2. They would not bow the knee to Caesar, nor call him lord.
 - They were slandered for cannibalism, since they said that they eat flesh and drink blood.

- They were slandered for lust and immorality because they greeted one another with a holy kiss and held love feasts.
- They were slandered for home-wrecking because one member of a home became a Christian and it brought a sword into the household.
- They were slandered for atheism because they rejected the worship of emperors and the deities of Rome.
- They were slandered for rebellion and political disloyalty because their behavior was equivalent to mutiny.

And so what we have here is a slandering group of wealthy Jews who had made friends with the Roman authorities through their business deals, and now they want to use alliance in order to destroy this church.

People, this is nothing new. There are certain people who always want to make friends in high places; it was happening then and it's still happening today.

John 19:11-12: “Jesus answered, ‘You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above. Therefore the one who delivered Me to you has the greater sin.’ From then on Pilate sought to release Him, but the Jews cried out, saying, ‘If you let this Man go, you are not Caesar’s friend. Whoever makes himself a king speaks against Caesar.’”

The Jews were saying that they were Caesar’s friends and that they were trying to protect his interests.

Verse 9 - Then He goes on to say, “... who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.”

Yes, the Jews had their synagogue, and they went every Sabbath, yet they did what was really of their hearts afterwards: they pursued whoring after other gods.

Leviticus 20:6: “And the person who turns to mediums and familiar spirits, to prostitute himself with them, I will set My face against that person and cut him off from his people.”

God says when you go after other gods and when you do the customs of the people of that land, He will cut you off from your people.

John 8:39: “They answered and said to Him, ‘Abraham is our father.’ Jesus said to them, ‘If you were Abraham’s children, you would do the works of Abraham.’”

John 8:44 [“You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it.”] It got so bad for the church at Smyrna that the fake Jews told the Roman authorities that Polycarp, the pastor of the church who happened to be discipled by John, was starting a rebellion against Rome. So the Romans took Polycarp to be burned at the stake, and some of the Jews carried logs for the fire.

Romans 2:28-29 says “For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.”

Romans 9:6-7 reads as follows: “But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect. For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, ‘In Isaac your seed shall be called.’”

Let me sum this up for us. All people were born humans, yet some live their lives like wild animals and until they accept Christ, they will never be the people He intended for them to be. **Philippians 3:1-3:** “Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. For me to write the same things to you is not tedious, but for you it is safe. Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation! For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh ...”

Verse 10 – “Don’t fear.” Jesus says in spite of what you see, in spite of what you hear, don’t fear.

2 Timothy 1:7: “For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.”

Speaking of fear, Jesus says don’t be ashamed of suffering, you are suffering for Me; keep your mind sound.

2 Corinthians 5:7 gives us a reminder: “For we walk by faith, not by sight.”

If I look at my circumstances, I am going to fail; but if I look at Christ, I will prevail.

William Barkley says, “For a man to become a Christian anywhere was to become an outlaw. In Smyrna, above all places, for a man to enter the Christian church was literally to take his life in his own hands. In Smyrna, the church was a place for heroes.

Verse 10 – “Fear none of these things.”

The devil is going to cast you in prison and you will be tried for 10 days.

I can't help but to think about what Paul says in **2 Corinthians 4:17-18** [“For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.”] One way or the other, we get over our pain and discomforts, don't we? As that old saying goes, trouble won't last always.

Verse 11 – “He that has an ear let him hear.”

God speaks loud and clear to those who want to hear. He gives a warning. The second death will not harm the overcomer. **Revelation 20:6** [“Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years.”] Instead of death and torment, overcomers will have life and security.

Amen.