

## REVELATION 2:8-11

(Readings: 2 Corinthians 8:1-15; Psalm 23)

### Smyrna - The Faithful One!

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ...

While there was one obvious spiritual enemy in Ephesus with that overwhelming Temple to Diana in its midst, there were two in Smyrna.

For not only was there the pagan religion, which in Smyrna took the form of Emperor worship, there was also a large community of Jews who couldn't stand Christianity whatsoever!

But before we move into considering these two in more detail and also their place in what follows, let's note some details about the city of Smyrna itself.

And we should note first of all that it was most definitely a city.

A 'metropolis' it was called, in fact.

Like Ephesus it had a fine port; it was a free city and also had its own court.

It was even better built than Ephesus, though, a model of how town-planning should be.

The wide, straight streets run from one end of the city to the other.

It was a beautiful spot.

It claimed to be the 'glory of Asia.'

And there was the famous stadium and famous library and, oh, Homer was born here too!

And the temples!

They were everywhere!

Temples to Cybele, Apollo, Asklepios, Aphrodite, and Zeus.

Huge temples.

So everywhere the believer turned paganism stared him straight in the face.

But the paganism that stood out most of all at this time was that of Emperor worship.

We have come across this before in the introduction to these seven letters to the churches.

In Revelation 1 verse 10 there was that reference to the Lord's Day, the Christian Sabbath.

We noted it was called the Lord's Day there especially as a contrast to the so-called Emperor's Day which had become even a weekly event for many.

And Smyrna would have been such a place.

They loved Rome and the Emperor.

You see, Rome was quite clever.

For as they looked at how they could keep such a diverse empire together they found a ready ally spiritually in the status of the Emperor.

Because he was someone all could be compelled to owe allegiance to and yet they could still follow their everyday religions.

They were syncretistic.

What was another god when they already had so many?

And in the meantime Rome had sneakily brought them on side.

Except for those pesky Christians of course!

They weren't bowing the knee for anyone - even if it were just once a year!

This is why the way the text begins addresses this.

For verse 8 makes it clear that IT'S HERE CHRIST IS THE CONQUEROR.

How can we know that from verse 8?

Well, where have we heard these words before?

Because there are two expressions we have met before.

In verse 18 of chapter 1, to be exact.

And those expressions are clearly titles for the risen Christ.

"The First and The Last," is the first of these.

This was a phrase to encourage the Smyrnian Christians.

For they were in a lot of trouble.

The pressures of Emperor worship and the incessant slander of the Jews really put them constantly under the hammer.

But here they're told that no matter what happened, no matter what the situation, from before the beginning of time to long after the end this time, the Risen Christ is with them.

This was the truth Paul was inspired to declare in Romans 8.

He declared in the verses 38 and 39 there was nothing in heaven or on earth which could separate him from the love of God in Jesus Christ his Lord.

The Risen Christ is definitely the First and the Last!

The second title is equally strengthening.

When the Lord calls Himself the One "who died and came to life again" He reminds those believers there that they have absolutely nothing to fear!

He has conquered death itself!

What comfort that would have been for those facing death at any moment.

How much wouldn't this have helped them in the everyday struggle there was being a Christian there?

You see, there were those who had already died for the faith.

And soon there would be others too.

But look at where they're going?

And look at who has gone ahead of them there!

It's Jesus!

Their Saviour is the Lord of history and the conqueror of death.

He is the One "who died and came to life again."

Verse 9 really brings this empathy home.

"I know your afflictions and your poverty," the Lord says.

Think of it.

He **knows**.

In this way we come to the second aspect of our text this afternoon.

For now we turn to note, IT'S THERE THE SAINTS ARE SUFFERING.

Congregation, the Son of God who is in control of all things "knows" their sufferings.

And not only knows it because He has been through it but He knows about it because He planned it this way.

This is all a part of His plan.

Now, that might seem like Christ is some kind of sadistic master.

But actually as the one who "knows" He is the perfect Master because He's working out what is divinely best through all this.

This is why I get irritated when I hear stories of miraculous rescues of Christians or congregations from dangerous situations.

I'm sure you heard some of those stories.

One of them describes a Russian Underground Church meeting in the forest during the time of the communist persecution.

Suddenly one of those Christians has a word from the Lord.

And that word says they must leave that location immediately because the KGB is very close.

So they escape by the skin of their teeth!

But, tell me, what about those congregations which didn't get such prophetic words said to them?

How about those rounded up and sent off to somewhere in Siberia?

Did they have any less faith?

Isn't it actually true that that is the way the Lord meant it to be for them?

In fact, aren't there more churches rounded up that way than those incredibly saved the other way!

You can see what I'm getting at, can't you?

When Jesus speaks of knowing their afflictions and poverty and slander they undergo, He's speaking about His way of sanctifying them.

This is both for their good and His good!

The word "afflictions" certainly shows this.

It can also be translated as "pressure."

In other words, Jesus enables us to cope with the pressures of life.

And how does He do that if not for His Spirit in us?

Doesn't Paul speak at one point of being in such a position?

In 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 1 he relates such a circumstance.

In verse 8 and 9 there he says, "We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure.

"Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death.

"But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead."

And then the word "poverty" endorses this.

For the Greek word used here is not the poverty of a man who has to work for his living but the poverty of the man who has nothing at all.

So as far as their worldly wealth was concerned, the Smyrnian Christians had nothing.

But they had God.

It seems that being Christians meant they suffered material loss.

Perhaps their property was pillaged or they were severely fined by the authorities.

Whatever the case, it was because of their faith.

Which meant they were in the most excellent company!

Doesn't 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 8 verse 9 declare, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich yet for your sake became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich."

And then there is the "slander".

In this case it is the slander of the Jews - often those who were ethnically exactly the same as them.

But how much didn't they hate the gospel!

The Jews were set so much against the Christians they were even willing to do them into the authorities.

And do them in with accusations which they themselves should have been charged with!

For how else could they lay charges of not bowing down in Emperor worship?

The Risen Christ calls the Jewish Synagogue here "the synagogue of Satan."

And it would normally be called "the Synagogue of the Lord."

That shows how twisted the Jews had become.

Here we see a clear reference to Christians being the true children of Abraham.

This is what Paul means in Romans 2 verse 28.

For there the apostle says, "A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical."

This is why the Lord can tell those believers they are rich.

They have all eternity with the Lord to look forward to.

But even now they are immeasurably blessed!

It's this encouragement which will help them endure what lies ahead.

For this is what verse 10 outlines.

In the words of the third aspect to this text, IT'S CLEAR THERE'S FURTHER PURIFYING AHEAD.

You know, I don't think this would be a well received message in many pulpits today!

Fancy being told, "Don't be afraid of what you're about to suffer."

It has to be put a little more positively than that!

How about, "God's ways to blessing in your life"?

Or, "Seven steps to a better financial future"?

Not quite the same, is it?

Indeed it's not!

For to say, "I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you," is not a good look!

And while ten days of persecution might not seem much, it's still not the kind of course I'm looking for!

We must also realise this is what is still to happen.

Something which will most likely be quite intense, though of a local and temporary nature.

A little bit of the later history of that congregation helps us understand the nature of this persecution.

For it would be those Jews in Smyrna who would show how they were indeed a synagogue of Satan by the way they joined in with the pagans in demanding the death of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna.

That incident is one of the well-known martyrdom's in the early New Testament church.

The day they did this was one of their festival days.

The crowds were in that highly excitable and inflammatory state.

The cry went up to seize Polycarp.

Everyone knew he freely confessed Christ.

Polycarp was given the choice: Worship the godhead of Caesar, or die.

The Jews led the shouts of the mob: 'This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of the gods, who teaches many neither to offer sacrifice nor to worship.'

Polycarp was given the choice - sacrifice to Caesar or be burned.

He gave his immortal answer: 'Eighty and six years have I served Christ, and He has never done me wrong.

'How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?'

It was the Sabbath day, but the Jews were among those who gathered wood for the fire to burn him - and so breaking their own Sabbath law.

'It is well,' said Polycarp, 'I fear not the fire that burns for a season, and after a while is quenched.

'Why do you delay?

'Come, do your will.'

Then, as the flames licked his body, he prayed his great prayer.

He said, "I Thank You that You have graciously thought me worthy of this day and of this hour, that I may receive a portion in the number of martyrs, in the cup of Your Christ."

And so Polycarp died.

The counsel that the Lord gave those Smyrnian believers in verse 10 was fulfilled by them.

For they were not afraid and they were faithful, both of which Polycarp showed for us.

But even more he proved the words of verse 10 as he suffered persecution even to the point of death.

You know, congregation, persecution for us may seem a million miles away.

We haven't known of it in our place and time.

But that is not the norm for most Christians of most ages and places.

In fact, it has been upon the blood of the martyrs that the Church has been built.

Whether the blood of the apostles or the Church Fathers or the Huguenots or the Covenanters or those where communism ruled or today living in countries where other religions hold despotic power.

Our situation here is not normal, congregation.

In fact, what we have here is most abnormal.

And while we pray for our government to become more biblical it is more likely that they will become more pagan and our faith will cost us much more.

You only need to hear the words of the Lord Jesus about this.

Did He ever offer any follower a flowery bed of ease?

Was he preaching about health and wealth while still here below?

Certainly not!

In Luke 9 verse 58 He can promise nothing but a life of hardship to His disciples.

And there's many other scriptures which confirm the same.

Dear friend, you would never be able to say that you've been persuaded to follow Christ on false pretences.

W.T. Maltby once said that Christ promised His people three things - that they would be in constant trouble; that they would be completely fearless; and that they would be absurdly happy.

And indeed that's how verse 10 ends!

The "crown of life" referred to here is not describing the reward there is waiting for the saints up above - it's what we wear on our heads now.

Because this is the festal crown - the crown worn at marriages and other joyful occasions.

No wonder the pagans and those Jews were furious!

This faith flew right in the face of everything they held so dear!

But what we especially note, congregation, is that IT'S WHERE THE SPIRIT IS VERY NEAR.

You see, verse 11 reminds the Christians there.

This is what the Spirit is saying to them - each one of them!

It's the most positive commendation that any of the seven churches receive.

The Lord has a special purpose for these saints.

And to be used for that special purpose they will be refined through the fire of persecution.

How much hasn't that been the Church at her finest?

In those times and places where the fires of persecution were so fierce and overwhelming it seemed as if

Christ's witness had been burned up, what a blessing came from it?

Consider communist China!

Didn't so many in the West wonder how that young church would manage when the missionaries were expelled in 1949?

And look what we found when that land was opened up in the 1980's!

The Church had grown incredibly!

And it's happened in Ethiopia and Eritrea and Central America and so many other places too!

When the lampstand seemed to have been extinguished it was only because we couldn't see.

Mind you, we may well wonder about some of the massacres where so many died at one place and time.

Who could forget the Armenian devastation?

Well might the Turkish government try!

And well might we think, humanly speaking, it was the end of Christ's church there.

But did any of those true believers lose their souls?

How true the conclusion of verse 11 is!

For there the Lord declares, "He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death."

The second death is what we also meet later in Revelation 21 verse 8.

There it is described as "the fiery lake of burning sulphur."

This is a Jewish Rabbinic phrase, which would have been well known to many receiving these writings.

It was particularly speaking of the annihilation of the wicked.

You see, those true to Christ - those found righteous in Him through faith in His Name - might die for that faith here below, but they would certainly have life for all eternity!

The one who is faithful unto death dies to live.

The one who saves his life at the cost of principles and his loyalty to Christ, however, lives to die.

This is the truth those saints would have often sung about in their gathering for worship together.

Psalms 23 verse 4 is but one example from the psalms.

But how much isn't it well-known - for them  
and for us?

As David sings there, "Even though I  
walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear  
no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they  
comfort me."

Congregation, the Lord knows what He tells us here.

He has been here.

And He will bring us through to His peace up  
there.

Amen.

PRAYER:

Let's pray...

O Great Conqueror - Mighty King!

Please so grant us Your Spirit that we will endure  
for You.

Help us to do what please You - not what  
pleases those around us.

Even though that may mean increasing hardship in the  
times ahead, keep us focused on Your Word.

That's the Word we have heard and which has  
changed us forever.

And that's the Word which points us to life  
everlasting with You.

In the Name of the Living Word, we pray, Amen.