

Faithful to the End: Lessons from the Church of Smyrna

In our journey through the Book of Revelation, we're examining Christ's letters to the seven churches. These letters weren't just meant for those specific congregations but contain timeless wisdom for believers throughout history. Last week, we looked at the church of Ephesus, which had forgotten its first love. Today, we turn to Smyrna, a church facing persecution yet remaining faithful.

What Was Smyrna Like in the First Century?

Smyrna was a beautiful city about 35 miles north of Ephesus. Known as the "Glory of Asia," it was founded in the 4th century and was proud of its heritage. The birthplace of Homer, Smyrna was one of the first Roman cities and enjoyed considerable wealth through its harbor commerce. It was a planned city with wide streets and a beautiful marketplace.

The city was filled with temples dedicated to Greek and Roman gods, but perhaps the most significant was the imperial temple dedicated to emperor worship. The emperor at that time, Domitian, was an arrogant and violent man who considered Christians toxic. He demanded that citizens worship him as god.

The Challenge Christians Faced in Smyrna

In the Roman Empire, citizens were required to burn incense once a year and declare "Caesar is Lord." After doing so, they would receive a certificate proving their loyalty. Christians, however, refused to do this, declaring that "Jesus Christ alone is Lord." This stance led to severe persecution.

Christians in Smyrna faced:

- Economic hardship (blacklisted from jobs and business opportunities)
- Social ostracism
- Physical persecution
- Slander from those who opposed them
- The threat of imprisonment and death

Christ's Message to the Suffering Church

Unlike His message to Ephesus, Christ offers no correction to Smyrna—only encouragement. His words reveal several important truths:

Jesus Identifies Himself as Sovereign Over History

"These are the words of him who is the first and the last, who died and came to life again."

This title reminds the church that despite their suffering, Caesar is not Lord—Jesus is. He controls history, and He has overcome death itself. This would have been incredibly encouraging to believers facing the threat of martyrdom.

Jesus Acknowledges Their Suffering

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

The Greek word for "afflictions" (thlipsis) means extreme stress. Jesus doesn't minimize their suffering but acknowledges it fully. He also recognizes their poverty (ptochos), which means destitute or the lowest of the low. Many Christians lost their livelihoods because of their faith.

Yet Christ declares them "rich"—not financially, but rich in the grace of God that never stops flowing. They possessed eternal riches that could never be taken away.

Jesus Warns of Coming Persecution

"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."

Jesus doesn't promise to remove their suffering but prepares them for it. The reference to "ten days" recalls Daniel and his friends who were tested for ten days to see if their faith would endure. Roman prisons were not rehabilitation centers but detention centers preparing people for execution.

Jesus Promises Eternal Reward

"Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown."

Using an athletic metaphor, Jesus promises a victory crown to those who remain faithful. The "second death" (eternal separation from God) will have no power over those who overcome.

The Legacy of Smyrna's Faithfulness

The church at Smyrna took Christ's words to heart. Their pastor, Polycarp (believed to have been installed by the Apostle John himself), was eventually captured and brought before the authorities. When commanded to recant his faith, he replied:

"Eighty-six years I have served Christ, and He never did me any harm. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"

Polycarp was executed, but his final words were a prayer of thanksgiving that God had counted him worthy to drink the cup of suffering.

What Does This Mean for Us Today?

While most of us in North America don't face physical persecution, we live under different pressures:

1. The pressure to compromise our values in a secular culture
2. The temptation to prioritize comfort over conviction
3. The risk of ridicule or social exclusion for our beliefs
4. The challenge of maintaining distinct Christian identity in a consumer society

We may not experience physical suffering, but we may face ridicule, mockery, or slander for our beliefs. The question remains: Are our lives any different from non-believers? Do we stand out as representatives of Christ?

Life Application

As we reflect on the church at Smyrna, here are some ways we can apply their example:

1. Remember your primary identity comes from Christ, not from culture, career, or social status.
2. Pray for persecuted Christians around the world who continue to face what Smyrna faced.
3. Examine your willingness to sacrifice for your faith. As missionary Jim Elliot (who gave his life bringing the gospel to the Auca Indians) said: "He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."
4. Consider where you might be compromising to fit in with the surrounding culture.
5. Maintain an eternal perspective. The temporary sufferings of this life cannot compare to the eternal glory that awaits those who remain faithful.

Ask yourself:

- In what areas of my life am I tempted to compromise my Christian values to avoid discomfort?
- How would my priorities change if I truly believed that eternal rewards outweigh temporary comfort?
- Am I willing to be "different" for the sake of Christ, even when it costs me something?

Remember, our purpose is to display Christ. We are called to be lights in this dark world, representing Jesus in all our relationships—whether at home, school, or in business. May the Holy Spirit empower us to be faithful to the end, looking forward to the crown of life that awaits us.