

The Church under Pressure - Smyrna

1. Introduction – The Seven Churches of Asia	1
2. The Church Of Smyrna	2
a. Background and History of the City of Smyrna	2
b. The Effect on the Church at Smyrna	2
c. Three Things Those at Smyrna Faced.....	3
3. The Greatest Cost	5
a. Getting Started	5
b. A Crown Given To the Faithful	6
4. Conclusion – the Martyr’s Reward	6
a. Commitment	6
b. Challenge.....	6

Reading

Rev 2:8-11 *"To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. 9 I know your afflictions and your poverty--yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 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, anyou will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. 11 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death."*

1. Introduction – The Seven Churches of Asia

The pattern by which the Lord addresses the angel of each church is found in looking at this segment of Scripture in this manner:

- The Commission
- The Character
- The Commendation
- The Condemnation
- The Correction
- The Call
- The Challenge

Yet when we come to the second church, Smyrna, there is no condemnation given to this church, because there was so much external pressure being exerted on this church. In fact, there are only two churches of the seven that are given no condemnation and need for correction: Smyrna and Philadelphia.

2. The Church Of Smyrna

a. Background and History of the City of Smyrna

- The city of Smyrna had a long and honourable history behind it. One thousand years before the earthly ministry of Christ, this colony had been established. Seven centuries prior to the arrival of Christ, this city had gone down in defeat to the Asiatic Lydians and would remain that way for three hundred years.
- At the end of these three hundred years, there had been some staunch Greeks who took back over the city and restored it to its former state. In the second century B.C., this city had developed into one of Rome's strongest allies and gained even more strength.
- Smyrna was one of the most beautiful cities of its day. Some historians even debate that Smyrna was the most elegant city that the Grecians ever built. The city sloped down toward the sea and along the sides of the hill was a very large amphitheatre where over twenty-thousand people could sit. It was there that worship to Caesar was granted. '*Kaiser Curios*' ... Caesar is Lord!
- Those who refused to embrace this total act of allegiance became marked men and were noted as traitors of the government. To be a Christian in the Roman Empire during that bloody era of history was to live in jeopardy every single day. The tortures that were inflicted on Christians are almost unspeakable.
- Some of the Christians in the early church were placed in a rack that bore chains. Their hands and their feet were chained and every time that the believer refused to deny the Lord the chains were tightened to such an extent that they would actually be ripped from limb to limb. Others were thrown to lions. Others were literally cooked alive in boiling pots of hot oil ... and we think we are persecuted today?

b. The Effect on the Church at Smyrna

- The church at Smyrna was hit by pressure, poverty and persecution. Yet, Jesus brought no condemnation; the Lord has no complaint to speak. The character and conduct of the church at Smyrna was such that it was above reproach.
- The pressure that this church was under made terrible demands upon them. However, their spirit allowed them to pass through such without complaint. There is no greater work of grace than for someone to suffer wrongfully and yet show through it all a gracious spirit.
- The Lord watched these saints at Smyrna. Their spirit under affliction was an incredible example. Our true walk with God will only be revealed through bruising and pressure – unfortunate but true, as we see with the prophets of old and the early church.
- The church at Smyrna mirrored a Lord who had:

- Endured the terrible experiences of the Cross
- Displayed an *'amazing grace'*
- Endured the shame of provocative men, and
- Still did not fall prey to anger and resentment

That is a high calling to reach for.

- The Lord simply says, "*I know your works.*" Otherwise, all is silent.

Someone here may be at this point now:

- Overwhelmed with great and crushing sorrow
- Longing to hear the voice of God, but only experiences silence

That silence you experience may be a sign not of disapproval but of approval, as was the case for Smyrna.

c. Three Things Those at Smyrna Faced

In the segment of Scripture, there were some things the Lord stated that He knew the church at Smyrna faced.

1) The Affliction They Faced

The word used in this context is 'THLIPSIS'. The word is used here to give indication to the pressure of stones used to grind wheat or to crush grapes. It is a word that throbs with meaning. This church was being pressed even to their own deaths because of their devotion to God.

"I know your 'thlipsis', the crushing, the pressure of persecution and sorrow and death." (v9)

2) The Poverty They Faced

The word used here in this context is 'PTOCHOEIA'. The word actually means *'beggarly.'* The Christians at Smyrna had been reduced to poverty.

The question arises: Why were these saints so destitute? Smyrna was one of the richest cities in Ancient Rome, yet the saints at Smyrna had been reduced to being beggars.

They were almost without exception poor anyway. Far too many account success and greatness in terms of riches, fame and fortune. God just needs ordinary, plain people whom He can fill with His power to do extraordinary things.

They were severely persecuted. They were deprived of the right to work. No trade union would have them. No business would hire them. They were boycotted on every hand. They lived in destitution.

"I know (your 'thilipsis') the pressure unto death and the agony under which you live."

"... In addition, I know (your 'ptocheia') your destruction and your absolute want and need."

In all of this there is a parenthetical statement ("*but you are rich*") in Revelation 2:9. It is though as if the Lord bends over them and whispers to them the great truth:

- Smyrna counts you poor
- The slander of the Jews has defiled you
- The persecution of the pagans has robbed you
- I know the pain of poverty
- I know the plight of being penniless

But:

- You have not lost anything
- You have not forfeited the riches of spiritual wealth

When we look to the principles of the Scripture, there are things that come to light:

- True wealth is the wealth that never tarnishes, never decays, and never fades
- The true fullness of a man's life is determined by his fellowship with God
- True wealth is the enrichment of character not the possession of gold

3) The Slander They Faced

The Lord says lastly, "*I know the slander that you face.*" The word used here in this context is BLASPHEMIA. This word is usually associated with slander against God. However, in this setting it refers to the slander that the '*synagogue of Satan*' stirs against the Church.

The Emperor Nero had an actor, Aliturus, whom he admired very much. He also had another vile friendship with another man named Popaea. Both of these men were Jews. They used their contact with the Emperor to feed the slander against the early church. It was because they were convicted of their sins that they fought the early church so vigorously. The result was the first stages of Christian persecution.

However, the Lord knew of the plight of the saints at Smyrna, he urged them to be faithful unto death, and he would give them a crown. Not only did He know about the problems they faced, He was associated with them in their sufferings.

It was in the synagogue that He had been forced to endure the mockery of supposed religion.

3. The Greatest Cost

a. Getting Started

One of these great days, we will be ready to get our work for God started,

Someone has to be there at the start. Someone has to be there when there is nothing.

Nothing major happened in the ministry of missionary to Columbia, Veneer Larson, until his wife Abigail died in childbirth. Now Columbia would get a glimpse of how the evangelical missionary would handle death and the grief surrounding the occasion; what would be the reality of his preaching. Veneer Larson wrapped in nothing but grace built a crude wooden coffin and laid his wife to rest. He lovingly dug the grave where he placed the box. He sang a hymn and preached the funeral message.

Then he took his children by the hand and led them back to a home with no wife and mother. He read the letters from his family in Canada as he rocked that small infant and attempted to keep it quiet. He consoled the children the best that he knew how. The letters from North America all said, "*Come Home.*" But, Veneer Larson looked into tomorrow and saw Columbia without God. He could not and would not take Columbia's hope back to Canada and close the door for revival.

The funeral had a purpose beyond the burial of Abigail. It was on that day that the Colombians saw the strength and courage of faith in Jesus. It was the seed that grew so fast that it startled even the observers. Their tomorrows were filled with revival and lost souls being captured. It was the beginning of the revival that would bring many more missionaries and see the explosion of the true Christian church.

With persecution unparalleled, but conversions unprecedented, Satan's kingdom began to crumble.

When men fight for freedom, there are images and monuments that are associated with freedom. The things that they go into danger for, the freedom they are willing to die for is something that they have seen.

Such is not the case for the man who gives his life for the Kingdom. No martyr ever saw Heaven. No martyr could ever really understand for what he was dying. Certainly, he was willing to die for a God who had delivered him from his own sin, but there was nothing physical he could see. That is what makes the martyr all the more powerful:

- To die for the Kingdom
- To fall to the ground and die
- Yet in dying, he brings forth much fruit

John 12:24 *I can guarantee this truth: A single grain of wheat doesn't produce anything unless it is planted in the ground and dies. If it dies, it will produce a lot of grain.*

It is at this point that the cost gives way to the greatest reward – a crown.

b. A Crown Given To the Faithful

The promise that comes to the church at Smyrna is to, *“Be faithful unto death and I will give you a crown.”*

The crown is more than just a crown of royalty. It is a crown of victory, a crown of added wealth. It is even more. It is the very crown of eternal life.

True life reigns because it has won through a walk and battle for righteousness. The pressure of affliction is not accidental or impulsive:

- Out of affliction comes victory
- Out of darkness comes light

That is the whole philosophy of suffering. This is the principle gained from pressure. This is the mark of the church at Smyrna.

4. Conclusion – the Martyr’s Reward

a. Commitment

In a survey in the Pentecostal Herald, from November of 1998 to January of 2001 the number of licensed ministers 28 years old and younger in the United Pentecostal Church (USA) declined by 16%. For the same period, the decline in the number of ministers 36 years of age and younger was 7 1/2 %. It was not until they got to ministers in their late 30's and into their 40's that there was an increase in the number of ministers for that November 1998 to January 2001 time period.

There is no shortage of young people in that United Pentecostal Church. Every Youth Congress there are successive record crowds. However, in the pursuit of the *‘good life’* how many have ignored the call of God in our lives. Like Martha we have found that we are overloaded by many *‘things’* – relevant or not.

b. Challenge

What are we going to do with our lives? That is the greatest question.

Crowns are reserved for God's faithful servants. One missionary Adoniram Judson, a missionary to Burma found faithfulness to be a premium during his tenure there. He was arrested and falsely accused of being an enemy agent.

His wife, Anne, would creep in after dark and whisper to him through his cell window, "*Hang on, Adoniram, God will give us victory.*" Then one night she stopped coming. No one told him that she was dying.

Months later, he was released; a man whose body was so broken it was a miracle he could walk. He found his wife just before she died. On that day, Adoniram Judson lost his wife, but not his faith. He lost his loved one, but not his courage. He began to preach again, and soon was building churches. When he died, he left scores of churches and hundreds of converts in a Muslim nation.

When the last bit of life is squeezed out of us, what do we want to leave behind us as we go forward to receive that crown of life?