

Christ's Letter To The Churches: Smyrna

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And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive; I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan. Fear none of those things which thou shall suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.

Revelation 2:8-11

Smyrna, like Ephesus, was a rich coastal city. It was located about thirty-five miles north of Ephesus on the Aegean Sea. It was a loyal ally of Rome, even before Rome gained its greatness. Smyrna was also a place of Emperor worship. The city built a temple for the worship of the Emperor Tiberius. In a word, Smyrna was a wealthy, powerful, pagan city, entirely given over to idolatry. But, in his merciful providence, God was pleased to send a gospel preacher to that city and establish a gospel church in her midst.

We have no way of knowing for certain how this church began; but in all likelihood, it was established by Paul, during his ministry at Ephesus (Acts 19:10). This church had remained faithful for many years in the midst of great trial. It was sound in doctrine, strong in faith, and in a spiritually healthy state. There was nothing in this church that needed to be corrected. The singular purpose of our Lord's letter to this church was to encourage His people to remain faithful, even unto death. Christ, who knows all things, knew what severe trials the church at Smyrna must face. In this letter He wisely prepares His people for their trials.

Our Lord Jesus Christ dictated this letter to John to comfort and strengthen His church in the midst of our earthly trials and to encourage us to persevere in the faith of the gospel. Though this letter was addressed

particularly to the church at Smyrna, historically, it was intended by Christ to be a message to us today. Though we in free societies no longer fear the persecutions of God's church as in days gone by, because God providentially restrains the powers of wicked men, yet it is still true 'all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution' (2 Timothy 3:12). If we follow Christ and seek to live in this world for the glory of Christ, we will suffer abuse at the hands of Christ's enemies. Our Saviour has told us, 'In the world ye shall have tribulation' (John 16:13). In this letter our Lord does four things to comfort and encourage His church in the midst of her troubles: (1.) our Lord Jesus Christ calls our attention away from our troubles to Himself (v. 8); (2.) our Saviour assures us of His constant care (v. 9); (3.) the Lord graciously quietens our fears (v. 10); and (4.) the Lord Jesus Christ encourages us to persevere (v. 11).

Look to Christ

As the letter opens, our Lord Jesus Christ calls our attention away from our troubles to Himself (v. 8). — 'And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive.'

The church at Smyrna, was a flock of harmless sheep in the midst of ferocious wolves. It was the object of malicious slander, reproach, and persecution. Her troubles were many. And, like all of us in times of trouble, the people of God at Smyrna were in danger of falling into the pit of self-pity, which always leads to despondency, if not despair. In order to prevent this from happening, the Lord Jesus says, 'Do not look upon your troubles, but look to me.' That is the thrust of this salutation: These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive.'

If we could learn to meditate upon and look to Christ with believing hearts, rather than meditating upon our earthly woes, our troubles on this earth would give us far less trouble. Everything on this earth is temporary. Christ, who is the first and the last, is eternal, and He has secured for us an eternal inheritance in glory. Let every troubled believer look to Christ, our eternal, unchangeable Saviour, and his troubles will seem insignificant.

The Lord Jesus Christ, our Saviour, is the first and the last. He is the first, for by Him all things were made. He is before all things; and by Him all things consist. Christ is the first, for He is Himself God, from everlasting to everlasting. And He is the last, for all things were made for Him. All things shall be brought to their final end by Christ. All things shall be judged by Christ. And all things shall show forth the praise of Christ. Christ is the first, for He is the foundation laid in Zion. And He is the last, for He is the top-stone, the chief-cornerstone, and the headstone of the corner in His spiritual temple, the church.

Our Saviour particularly would have us dwell and meditate upon His most glorious work and most glorious character, as our all-sufficient, unchanging, exalted Mediator and King. He is the One who 'was dead, and

is alive.'

There is no cure for despondent hearts like the knowledge of redemption by Christ. The cross of Christ is like the tree Moses cast into Marah's bitter waters. Take the blessed gospel doctrine of blood atonement and cast it into your bitter waters of earthly trouble, and it will make your bitter troubles sweet to your soul. Whenever you look for something to comfort your heart, encourage your faith, revive your soul, and cause your spirit to dance with joy, meditate on these two facts: First -He was dead. Second - He is alive.

The Lord Jesus Christ was dead. He died as our Substitute, under the penalty of our sins. He died to satisfy the offended justice of God for us to put away our sins. By His death, the Son of God purchased salvation for us. Christ died for us, what reason then do we have to fear?

Having died under the penalty of sin as our Substitute, the Lord Jesus rose again for our justification; and He is alive forever more. Christ died to obtain salvation. And He lives to apply salvation. 'For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life' (Romans 5:10). Christ lives as our Priest and King forever to save His elect (Isaiah 53:9-11). He lives to intercede for His people (John 17:9, 20; 1 John 2:1-2). He lives to protect His own (John 10:27-30). When we are aware of what Christ has done and is doing for us, we can smile at Satan's rage and face a frowning world (Romans 8:28-39).

Assurance

In verse 9 our Lord assures us of His constant care — 'I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.'

More tender, assuring, comforting words could not be spoken to troubled believers than the words of Christ to us in this verse. He says, 'I know.' It is enough for the child to know that his Father knows what is troubling him. It is enough for the wife to know that her loving husband knows her need. And it is enough for God's saints to know that Christ knows our peculiar circumstances. Here our Saviour gives us five words of assurance.

'I know thy works.' — Christ, who is the omniscient God, knows our works. For the unbelieving hypocrite this is terrifying. But for the believer it is comforting. He whose glory is our chief delight knows our works for Him. He not only knows them, He accepts them, through His own merit, and delights in them. He knows the motive of our works, that they are done out of love for Him (2 Corinthians 5:14). He knows the strength by which we perform our works for Him is the strength which His own grace supplies. And he knows that our works are performed from a sincere heart

that desires His glory. Peter's consolation, even in the teeth of his horrid sin, was the Master's knowledge of him (John 21:17). Let every believer find comfort here. - 'Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee.'

Believers never speak of their own works to God. We recognize that our best works are marred by sin and must be washed in the blood of Christ. But Christ will not fail to remember even a cup of cold water offered in His name (Matthew 10:41-42).

'I know thy tribulation.' — This is our Lord's legacy to His church. - 'In the world ye shall have tribulation' (John 16:33). He told us plainly that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of heaven (Acts 14:22). For the people of God, this world is a place of sorrow. Believers are soldiers in a hostile territory. Conversion is the beginning of conflict. To worship Christ is to enter into warfare with this world. No one can follow Christ without paying a price for doing so. In those early days of Christianity, believers suffered banishment, imprisonment, and death by wild beasts or burning at the stake. In these days the conflict is perhaps more subtle, but it is just as real. If you and I follow Christ, we will have to march contrary to the world at all times. It is the confession of Christ that causes the conflict. If we do not confess Christ in the teeth of His enemies, we will have no conflict. But that lack of confession will be a proof that we do not truly know Christ (Matthew 10:32-34).

Believers are a confessing people. We confess our sin to our Saviour, and confess our Saviour before men. We confess Christ in the waters of baptism, being buried with Him in the watery grave and rising with Him from the grave, we identify ourselves with our Lord and publicly declare our allegiance to Him (Romans 6:3-6). We confess Christ when we defend His honour amidst His enemies. We confess our Lord when we press His claims upon His enemies. We confess the Lord Jesus Christ when we make His gospel and His glory the rule by which we live in this world.

'I know thy poverty.' — These believers at Smyrna were brought to extreme poverty because of their confession of Christ. It was not at all uncommon for a man to lose his job when he was baptized. In those days, to be a believer, from an earthly point of view, meant real sacrifice.

Indeed, it is still true today, in measure. Believers frequently lose much by following Christ. If we are believers, anything that would keep us from worshipping Christ or honouring Christ must be forsaken, though it may cost us much in earthly goods. 'Ye cannot serve God and mammon.'

'But thou art rich.' — For the gospel's sake, these believers suffered tribulation and poverty. But there was no reason for them to begin to pity themselves. They may have seemed to be poor. Indeed, they were very poor, in the matter of earthly goods. But they were rich toward God, rich in spiritual possessions, and rich in grace (Matthew 6:20; 19:21; Luke 12:21).

Do not allow today's prophets of health, wealth, and prosperity to deceive you. Earthly riches are no sign of divine approval. And earthly poverty is no sign of divine displeasure. If we are believers, if we are in Christ, we are rich (Ephesians 1:3). All the riches of God's grace are ours in Christ. All the blessings of God's covenant are ours in Christ. We are heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ (Romans 8:17). It is written, 'All things are yours.'

And our Lord assures us that He knows His true people from those who merely profess to be His people. — 'I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.'

There was a large population of Jews in Smyrna. They had settled there, because Smyrna was a good place of business, and built a syna-gogue. As always, these Jews were filled with hatred for the people of God. They both blas-phemed Christ and accused His people of horri-ble crimes before the Romans. These physical de-scendants of Abraham thought they were the peo-ple of God. But our Lord calls them the synagogue of Satan.

'How anyone can say that the Jews of today are still, in a very special and glorious, and pre-eminent sense, God's people, is more than we can understand. God himself calls those who re-ject the Saviour and persecute true believers "the synagogue of Satan". They are no longer his peo-ple.' (William Hendriksen)

Yet, this text has a wider application. Those assemblies which are set up in opposition to the truths of the gospel, though they call themselves Christian churches, are all synagogues of Satan. He presides over them. He works in them. And his interests are served by them. What are these synagogues of Satan? — Any church that equates morality with righteousness (Romans 10:1-4) — Any church that promotes will worship (Colossians 2:23) — Any church that puts salvation and redemption in the hands of man (Galatians 2:21) — Any church that substitutes ceremonialism and ritualism for worship.

God's covenant people, the true Israel of God, is the church of God, Christ's spiritual seed. A man's family tree, outward religious exercises, profession of religion, and doctrinal creed has nothing to do with his relationship to God. Christianity, faith in Christ is a matter of the heart. It is altogether inward and spiritual. — 'They are not all Israel which are of Israel' (Romans 9:6; 2:28-29; Philippians 3:3).

It is most comforting to believers, in the midst of their earthly trials, to hear the Son of God say, 'I know.' He who is our Saviour is the sovereign King

of the universe; and He knows all about us. His eye is always upon us.

Fear None

Our Lord graciously quietens our fears in verse 10. — 'Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.'

Again, I remind you that, as long as we live in this world, we are going to suffer. And our Lord here plainly warns us that the longer we live in this world the more our sorrow will increase. Particularly, He is talking about the evil which we must suffer at the hands of wicked men, who, unknowingly, are the pawns of Satan himself. Yet, our blessed Saviour says, 'Fear none of those things.' Though Satan roars against us, he cannot devour God's elect. No matter how great our sufferings on this earth may be, here are four facts which should quieten our fears.

1. Our sufferings in this world are governed and regulated by our Saviour (1 Corinthians 10:13).

It is true, we often suffer at the hands of wicked men. And, like Job we suffer much from Satan himself. But both wicked men and Satan are under the rule of Christ. They can do nothing without our Redeemer's permission (Job 1:12; 2:6). And whatever God permits our enemies to do will be best for us (2 Samuel 16:10-12).

2. Those things that we suffer will not last long. Our sorrow will not be perpetual. It will last for a set time and that set time is really a very short time. 'Ye shall have tribulation ten days', that is to say, 'You will suffer for a definite, but brief time'. Surely, we who live for eternity and live in eternity should be able to patiently bear our light afflictions, realizing that they are but for a brief moment in time (Isaiah 26:20; 54:8-10; Matthew 24:22; 2 Corinthians 4:18; 1 Peter 1:6).

3. The purpose for our trials is to prove our faith. God allows the temptation, the trial, and the tribulation, 'that ye may be tried'. God sovereignly uses Satan's vicious attacks to prove His elect. Satan's intent is to destroy us. But God graciously uses his wicked designs to prove us (James 1:2,

3, 12).

To put it in the words of John Gill, 'Suffering times are trying times, whether men are real Christians or no; whether they have the true grace of God or not; and whether the principles they hold are right and true, and are worth and will bear suffering.'

Sooner or later, God will prove our faith. It will be clearly demonstrated

whether or not we really trust Him.

4. All who endure temptations shall receive a crown of life.

Our Master says, 'Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.' This is not a promise of a special crown for martyrs. All who belong to Christ shall receive a crown of life. God has promised this crown to all who love Him (James 1:12). The crown is eternal life itself (1 Corinthians 9:25). Faithfulness is the one thing God requires of His people. And faithfulness is the one thing all believers have. God's people are faithful. Once a sailor, sailing through a storm made this statement: 'God, you may sink me if you will; You may save me if you will. But, whatever happens, I will keep my rudder true.' That is the believer's attitude. To those who are faithful unto death, Christ promises the crown of glory, eternal salvation (Matthew 10:22).

Perseverance Encouraged

Here is a promise to those who persevere unto the end, to those who are conquerors and more than conquerors in Christ. 'He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches: He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death'(v. 11).

There is a second death. Death in itself is the result of sin. And physical death is tormenting to men. But there is a second, eternal, spiritual death, which is the death of the body and of the soul in hell (Revelation 20:4). But this second death has no claim upon God's elect. Though we may be put to death physically, we shall never die (John 5:25; 11:25; Revelation 20:6). We have been ordained to eternal life (Acts 13:48). Christ purchased eternal life for us (Hebrews 9:12). We have eternal life now (1 John 5:13). We shall soon obtain the glory of that eternal life. Christ Himself will give it to us.

The greatest encouragement there is to faithfulness and perseverance is the assurance of our security and eternal life in Christ (Hebrews 11:13-16; Colossians 1:21-23).

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