

Churches Nearer Heaven Smyrna—Enduring hardship and persecution

Intro: We can learn a lot from the churches of Bible. Each of them has its own distinctive character that may help us in our service to God. Let's consider another of the seven churches of Asia—Smyrna. The Lord's letter to the church at Smyrna does not contain a single word of rebuke or correction. Instead there is the most sympathetic and loving acknowledgement of the hardships that the church was facing and an assuring promise for hardship yet to come. The church at Smyrna can teach us a lot about another feature of a church nearer heaven—enduring hardship and persecution (Rev. 2:8-11).

The church's challenging environment

Smyrna was a city willing to worship the emperors as gods.

Smyrna had developed a reputation for loyalty to Rome even before its rise to dominance. Consequently, in 26 AD the city won out over several area cities for the right to build a temple to Emperor Tiberius, and from then on it became a center for the cult of emperor worship. The city never wavered in its loyalty to Rome, and the emperors protected Smyrna and contributed heavily to its development.

The emperor cult sought to secure the loyalty of all Roman citizens by asking that they burn incense to the emperor and acknowledge that He was Lord. Such a requirement would cause great problems for the Christians there.

Smyrna had an influential Jewish population antagonistic to Christians

A photo of a Jewish sarcophagus from Smyrna

Smyrna's physical hardships & persecutions

*I know your tribulation and your poverty ...and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.
(Revelation 2:9)*

Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. (Rev. 2:10)

Jesus identifies the problems facing the church

Tribulation—distresses caused by outward circumstances. A consistent message of the gospel is the inevitability of tribulation for the people of God because of their faith in Him.

For those days will be a time of tribulation such as has not occurred since the beginning of the creation which God created, until now, and never shall. (Mk. 13:19)

Poverty—distresses caused by lack of material things

There were two Greek words for poverty—one suggesting having nothing left over; the other suggesting having nothing at all. Jesus used the stronger word suggesting that the disciples in Smyrna were totally destitute.

It may very well be that the Christians there had been isolated and stripped of everything because of the hostility

against them. Such was not unprecedented in the ancient world. The Hebrew writer wrote to some Christians:
For you showed sympathy to the prisoners, and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and an abiding one.
(Hebrews 10:34)

Blasphemy—distresses caused by unfair accusation.

The hatred of Christians in the first century was not unexpected. Jesus Himself had warned of these things:
Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations on account of My name. (Matthew 24:9)

Such local hostility was particularly orchestrated by the Jewish community in Smyrna. Jesus' view of them comes forth in the most powerful of terms. Though they would proudly describe themselves as a synagogue of Jews who worshipped God, Jesus would describe them as those who are "not Jews" in the real spiritual meaning of that word and were instead serving Satan.

Future suffering—distresses yet to come by a persecuting government.

Jesus revealed both His love and sympathy by not withholding from them the truth about their future. He graciously revealed that Smyrna's sufferings were not yet over. They must prepare themselves for even more problems at the hands of their enemies.

Yet he assures them that the persecutions would be relatively brief—"ten days", perhaps a symbolic term indicated a short and measured period of time.

History has left the record of one of Smyrna's leaders, Polycarp, who was martyred in 155 AD. He was arrested on the charge of being a Christian. Amidst an angry mob, the Roman proconsul took pity on such a gentle old man and urged Polycarp to proclaim, "Caesar is Lord". If only Polycarp would make this declaration and offer a small pinch of incense to Caesar's statue he would escape torture and death. To this Polycarp responded, "Eighty-six years I have served Christ, and He never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" Steadfast in his stand for Christ, Polycarp refused to compromise his beliefs, and thus, was burned alive at the stake. The city's large Jewish population was extremely hostile to the disciples as well. Some of its members even broke the Sabbath to gather wood to burn Polycarp at the stake for his refusal to renounce his faith.

Smyrna's spiritual blessings and promised hopes

The church at Smyrna had:

Present wealth

Though the church had suffered great loss materially, they were rich by the Lord's reckoning:

... *but you are rich* (Rev. 2:9)

They were rich in grace, faith, in hope, in love—in the intangible and incorruptible spiritual wealth that comes through the gospel. And this would be a source of encouragement to them in their time of physical need.

A future reward

Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. (Rev. 2:10)

The command is often misunderstood—not merely be faithful for along as you live, but even if you must die!

Smyrna's acropolis, Mt. Pagus, rose more than five hundred feet above the city. Its summit was crowned with a garland of magnificent buildings known as the crown of Smyrna. The city was sometimes called the crown of Ionia and a crown was seen on its coins.

A coin with Cybele wearing a crown

The coin with the temple of Tiberius on the back has a picture of Tiberius' mother Augusta Livia and perhaps her son, the emperor himself. Guess what he is wearing? A victory crown!

Yet what the Lord offered was a crown more glorious than any of which the people of Smyrna could boast. It was the victory crown of life. But what assured the church that all these promises would be made good?

An eternal Lord

The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life (Rev. 2:8)

The church at Smyrna might have to go to their deaths for not saying that Caesar was first; but they could place their faith in the Lord who truly was first and last who had been victorious over death.

Consequently, they might have to succumb to death in this life; but their faith in the Lord would give them the victory over a death far more fearful!

He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death. (Rev. 2:11)

Application to us

Hopefully the story of this early church and one of its principle leaders will inspire us to see that...

God's people are not exempt from the hardships of this life.

All who live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.

The blessings of serving Christ are worth the sacrifices. Christ promises us spiritual riches here and eternal life "over there".

No matter what happens to us in this life we cannot be defeated; the victory is ours through our Lord Jesus Christ!

Conclusion: No one knows what the future holds for us; but each of us must be willing to endure whatever hardship or difficulty comes to us because we

**have decided to follow Jesus. The church at Smyrna shows us that it is possible. And the assuring words of the Lord show us that it is worth it:—
“be faithful until death and I will give you the crown of life”.**