

5. The Message to the Church at Smyrna

In our last topic, we saw that we want to help our physical and spiritual children learn to explain the one warning that Christ gave the church at Ephesus. We saw that Christ warned that church to remember, repent and repeat the first works so that they would not be removed. In our topic today, we will be looking at the letter to the church in Smyrna. We will see that this is one of only two churches to which Christ did not give a warning.

We are going to see that the Lord had nothing negative to say about the church in Smyrna. Revelation 2:8-9 says, “And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, these things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life: “I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and *I know* the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but *are* a synagogue of Satan.” This is the only place that the city of Smyrna is mentioned in the Bible. Smyrna was a city about thirty-five miles north of Ephesus and was a seaport. It was very loyal to Rome, and the worship of the Roman emperor was very strong in Smyrna. It was considered the most beautiful city in that region and had become a center for medicine and science. It also had a large Jewish population and these things all had an impact on the church in that city.

To this city Christ said that He is the First and the Last. Isaiah used this name several times to refer to the Lord. Isaiah 41:4 says, “Who has performed and done *it*, calling the generations from the beginning? ‘I, the LORD, am the first; and with the last I *am* He.” Then, Isaiah 44:6 adds, “Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: ‘I *am* the First and I *am* the Last; besides Me *there is* no God.” Finally, Isaiah 48:12-13 adds, “Listen to Me, O Jacob, and Israel, My called: I *am* He, I *am* the First, I *am* also the Last. Indeed My hand has laid the foundation of the earth, and My right hand has stretched out the heavens; *when* I call to them, they stand up together.” To both the Jews and those who worshiped the Roman emperor, this was a clear statement of the fact that Christ is God and is the Creator who alone deserves all worship.

Christ went on to say that He “was dead, and came to life.” This was a clear statement about the death and resurrection of Christ. The Jewish chief priests had tried to deny the resurrection. Matthew 28:11-15 says, “Now while they were going, behold, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened. When they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, saying, “Tell them, ‘His disciples came at night and stole Him *away* while we slept.’ And if this comes to the governor’s ears, we will appease him and make you secure.” So they took the money and did as they were instructed; and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day.” The Christians in Smyrna experienced tribulation from those who worshiped the Roman emperor. They also experienced tribulation from the Jews because many Jews turned against the Christians.

At the same time, Christ said that He knew their works. The word translated “works” can relate to the business or work in which we are employed. It can also relate to our works of service for Christ. Ephesians 2:10 says, “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” Then, 2 Timothy 2:21 adds, “Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and

useful for the Master, prepared for every good work.” Christ knew the works of the Christians in the church at Smyrna because those works were pleasing to Him.

Christ also knew about the poverty of the Christians in the church at Smyrna. Among the early Christians there was much poverty due to the seizing of their goods by both the Roman government and the Jews. 1 Peter 4:12-13 says, “Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.” Then, Hebrews 10:32-34 says, “But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings: partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations, and partly while you became companions of those who were so treated; for you had compassion on me in my chains, and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven.” This may have been the reason for the poverty of the Christians in Smyrna. However, God said that they were rich. Matthew 6:19-21 says, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” The Christians in Smyrna were laying up spiritual treasure.

Christ said, “*I know* the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but *are* a synagogue of Satan.” In Matthew 23:15, we read, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.” The scribes and Pharisees were physically Jews but spiritually they were far from God. Many of the Jews in Smyrna had the attitudes toward the Christians that the scribes and Pharisees had toward Christ. A synagogue could refer either to the building where the Jews worshiped on the Sabbath or to a gathering of Jews. Here, it is used to speak of Jews who opposed the Christians.

Christ went on to say, in Revelation 2:10, “Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw *some* of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.” Here, Christ made it clear that the church in Smyrna was about to experience additional suffering and persecution. We also see the source of persecution against true Christians when Christ said, “Indeed, the devil is about to throw *some* of you into prison.” That is why Ephesians 6:12 explains, “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual *hosts* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*.” Instead, we are reminded of the fact that Satan is the one who is really fighting against Christians. His goal as he fights against Christians is to keep Christians from sharing the Word of God with those who are not Christians. His goal for those who are not Christians is given in John 10:10, where we read: “The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have *it* more abundantly.” His goal is always to destroy others before they can come to Christ.

Christ went on to point out to the Christians in Smyrna that they would have tribulation for ten days. During the first three hundred years of the church, there were ten major efforts by the Roman emperors to destroy Christians and the church. Three of these times of severe persecution were in the first century, two in the second century and five in the third century. Christ told the disciples the night before His crucifixion, in John 16:33, “These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” In the same way, we can expect tribulation and persecution in our own day because Satan knows that his time is short and he wants to do everything possible to hinder the spread of the Gospel to any additional people. However, we can be joyful when facing persecution because of the fact that we know that Christ has overcome the world.

Christ told the church at Smyrna to “Be faithful unto death.” Here, we see the key characteristic that Christ looks for in the lives of those who follow Him. 1 Corinthians 4:2 says, “Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful.” Then, Luke 16:10 adds, “He who *is* faithful in *what is* least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in *what is* least is unjust also in much.” Paul provided an example by his life of faithfulness. 2 Timothy 4:7 says, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” We also see that Christ gives a promise to those who are faithful when He said that He will give “the crown of life”. James 1:12 says, “Blessed *is* the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.” In this verse, we see that the crown of life is the reward for endurance.

Revelation 3:11 says, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.” In this verse, we see again the encouragement that was given in the final verse to the church in Ephesus. Christ encourages the church at Smyrna to really hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to their church. We saw that all Christians have become overcomers. That is due to the fact that Christ had complete victory over Satan and we are in Christ. We see that as Christians we do not need to fear the second death because we will not be hurt by the second death. Revelation 20:6 says, “Blessed and holy *is* he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years.” Here, we see that the second death has no power over us when we are in Christ. In addition, we will reign with Him for a thousand years.

We want to help our physical and spiritual children recognize that they do not need to be fearful even if they face tribulation or persecution in the future. We may experience physical death but Christ says that we never will need to worry about spiritual death because the second death has no power to hurt us. May the Lord richly bless you as you equip your children to experience peace in any tribulation.