

Place: Lurgan Baptist 14:10:2003

Reading: Revelation 2:8-11

EXPLORING THE FUTURE

4. A CHURCH UNDER PRESSURE

A line has been drawn in the sand. Sides have been taken, and war has been declared. Hell is officially in session. And the church is under attack. With mounting hostility, the kingdom of Satan is engaging in a full scale war against the church of Jesus Christ. The foul forces of darkness are escalating their campaign against the people of God with an unholy vengeance. Like two weather fronts colliding, a violent storm is brewing across the horizon has never before.

Think for example of the scene at Hamilton Square Baptist Church in San Francisco. As church members gathered for their evening service on September 19th 1993, they knew it would be an eventful service. They just didn't know how eventful. The guest preacher for the evening was Lou Sheldon, an outspoken opponent of pro-homosexual legislation in California. As chairman of the Traditional Values Coalition, Sheldon had played a key role in overturning a 1989 partners ordinance in San Francisco.

As he came to speak, this church turned into a battleground. Two pro-homosexual newspapers had publicised Sheldon's visit, leading to a barrage of phone calls to the church offices all week. Militant homo-sexual activists promised to show up in force and threatened to disrupt the service. And disrupt they did. The service became a war zone. Like an invading army, approximately 100 rioters stormed the church ground and took

complete control of the exterior property. Angry protestors denied worshippers entrance into the church. Physical contact was used. One church member, a woman, was physically and forcibly carried away from the church's entrance by the activists.

All the while, the police stood by watching. Rioters vandalised church property. The church's Christian flag, was replaced by a homosexual flag. Innocent children were verbally harassed and threatened. Vile obscenities were yelled. When the service began angry gays pounded on the doors outside the sanctuary, taunting worshippers to come outside and join them in their sexual orgies. As the believers sang, the demonstrators threw eggs and rocks at the stained-glass windows. The pastor was pelted by debris and needed a police escort as he left in a church van. Sounds a bit like Sodom and Gomorrah. But this is America. Today. The most powerful nation in the Western world.

What's next ? Will this militant aggression by homosexual activists against the church continue ? What other " *minorities*," will join their cause and level their assault upon the

church ? One thing is absolutely clear. The Lord Jesus warned us it would be this way. Before His own crucifixion, the Saviour told us, "*If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it*

hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own, but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you." (Jn 15:19) No mistaking it the world will hate us. Paul echoed the same truth, "*This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come yea and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.*" (2 Tim 3:12) My if the first mark of a true and living church is Love, the second is Suffering. The one is naturally consequent on the other. A willingness to suffer proves the genuineness of love. We are willing to suffer for those we love.

Now the church at Smyrna knew all about this. Though they suffered physical privation and poverty, the Christians at Smyrna clung to their spiritual riches. Fittingly, the church at Smyrna is one of the two churches along with Philadelphia that received no rebuke in its letter from the Lord Jesus Christ. A church under pressure, Smyrna represents every persecuted church in every age, and every persecuted believer in every cultural setting. Lets take a trip back to ancient Smyrna.

(1) THE SETTING OF THIS CHURCH

Today it is the third largest city in Turkey and a major international trade centre, as well as the home of the Nato southern command headquarters and the prestigious Aegean University. The city is now known as Izmir, but during the first century when the Book of Revelation was written, its name was Smyrna. Smyrna was situated 35 miles up the coast

from Ephesus and it was the next city the postman would reach on his circular tour of the seven churches.

(a) ARCHITECTURALLY Smyrna was FAMOUS:

Prince Charles would have approved of the layout of this city. This was easily the most beautiful city in all of Asia Minor, "*the crown of Asia.*" It was fronted by the coast of the Aegean Sea and flanked by a circular hill called the Pagos. This beautiful hill elevated above the city was outlined with a street called "*The Street of Gold.*"

On this street were pagan temples and stately public buildings which gave the appearance of a jewelled crown. The streets were well-paved and lined with groves of trees, enhancing its majesty beauty. Because of their symmetrical arrangement, these buildings were called "*the crown of Smyrna,*" because from afar off they looked like a necklace of jewels. Years earlier, Alexander the Great had determined to make Smyrna the model Greek city. To many it was. With such a noble beginning, Smyrna had blossomed into a city of advanced culture. A place where the arts, education, philosophy, and the sciences flourished. Proudly, "*First in Asia in beauty and size,*"

was inscribed on their coins. Few would argue.

(b) *ECONOMICALLY Smyrna was FLOURISHING:*

It had a natural landlocked harbour where entire fleets could be sheltered from outside attack. This great harbour allowed it to be second only to Ephesus in exports. As a result, Smyrna was a large, flourishing centre of international commerce and trade with a prosperous economy.

(c) *POLITICALLY Smyrna was FAITHFUL:*

This was a city that was renowned for its faithfulness to Rome. When six cities competed for the privilege to erect a temple to Rome, Smyrna was chosen over the others. Her allegiance to Caesar was unquestioned. Now because of all this, Smyrna was a thriving centre for Roman emperor worship. In that day, Caesar was a god to the people. His image was carved in marble and set before the city along with burning incense. Every citizen was called upon to publicly worship and confess allegiance to Rome's ruler annually. Anyone who refused would be severely punished, immediately imprisoned, and executed by the sword. What were the believers to do ? They were faced with a choice. Caesar or Christ ? To confess Caesar meant liberty, to confess Christ as Lord meant possible death !

In addition to all of this Smyrna was a hotbed of pagan worship. Temples to Cybele, Apollo, Asclepias, Aphrodite, and Zeus were built there. Greek gods and goddesses were openly worshipped. What a contrast there must have been between the humble meeting houses of the believers and the glory of the temples of the gods of Greece. Smyrna was no easy place to be a Christian. Many believers were persecuted and put to death for their faith in Christ. In fact naming Christ in Smyrna was far more life-threatening than anywhere else in Asia. The word Smyrna means " *myrrh*," which was a fragrant spice used to make perfume. What happened was this. When the bark of the flowering myrrh tree was crushed it released a sweet aroma. Isn't that a lovely description of this church ? The more these believers were crushed by the world for their faith in Christ, the more the sweet aroma of their testimony was released. Unquestionably their faithfulness to Christ in the face of mounting opposition gave off the fragrance of Christ throughout the entire region.

(2) THE SUFFERING OF THIS CHURCH

Here the Risen Lord addresses five different levels of persecution on which this church Suffered.

(a) THEY WERE ATTACKED POLITICALLY:

" *I know thy works and tribulation.*" (2:9) He later identifies this tribulation as imprisonment by the Roman government. (2:10) This word '*tribulation*,' (thlipsin) is a very graphic word. Literally, it means to crush an object in an vice grip by tightening the screws. It pictures crushing a victim and squeezing out his life's blood. It was used of one who was mashed to death by an enormous boulder. The word also described the *pain of a woman in childbirth.*" The life of this little flock at Smyrna was being painfully squeezed out of them by the ironclad vice grip of the Roman government. They were being snatched out of their homes, arrested in the marketplace, and taken captive to prison. Caesar was bringing the full force of his imperial might powerfully down upon this little church. And many of them sealed their testimony with their blood. History tells of a man who at 92 chose abuse and death in a dungeon rather than deny the Lord Jesus. A 15 year old boy who could be deterred by no sort of cruelty from confessing Christ. A young woman who was subjected to the most cruel tortures and was thrown finally in a net to a wild beast. What happened was this. In 81 AD an insane Roman emperor by the name of Domitian rose to power. He was even more ruthless than Nero. Suddenly a second wave of persecution against the church swept throughout the Roman Empire.

Now its to this persecution that Christ refers in his letter to Smyrna. As the Roman Empire expanded, it conquered many territories and countries. Consequently there was a great diversity of languages and cultures among the people. How could Rome unite such divergence ? How could the Emperor weld together so many different nationalistic movements, some of which were conspiring to overthrow his rule ? Emperor worship became the answer. The worship of Caesar would tie the Empire together. So once a year, each citizen of Rome would appear before a bust of Caesar and publicly confess his allegiance to the deity of the emperor. For the great majority of Roman citizens this was no problem.

They already worshipped a plurality of pagan gods. What was one more god ? But for the Christians, this request was blasphemy. So instead of saying, "*Caesar is Lord,*" they courageously confessed, "*Christ is Lord.*" The result ? They suffered at the hands of the government. Such government persecution did not cease 2,000 years ago. It is still happening. I was amazed to read some of the things that are happening in the Western World today. Did you know that in America spiritual liberties are being stripped away from the believers ?

In America today It is unconstitutional if a student prays out loud over his lunch in school. It is unconstitutional for a board of education to use or refer to the word GOD in any of their official writings. It is unconstitutional for the Ten Commandments to be hung on the walls of schools. It is unconstitutional for a school graduation to contain an opening prayer or closing prayer. I wonder how much longer will it be before we are facing first century persecution ?

(b) THEY WERE ATTACKED ECONOMICALLY:

" I know thy poverty," (2:9) In Greek there are two words for poverty. The first (penia) describes the man who has nothing to spare, nothing extra. The second (ptocheian) describes the man who has nothing at all. That's the word that is used here. That's how poor this little church was. So poor they couldn't begin to make ends meet. Financially destitute, they didn't have penny to their name. The reason ? Well, to days health and wealth movement would answer, *" because they were outside the will of God. All they had to do was name it and claim it."* They were living beneath their privileges. God wanted them wealthy. Perhaps they should have been rebuked for their poverty ? No. They suffered poverty because they were in the will of God ! Financial prosperity is not Gods will for everyone. Sometimes it costs to be a Christian. Economically Smyrna was Flourishing. No recession in the economy there. Everyone else in Smyrna was prospering. Yet, these Christian business men were being sacked from their jobs. Their premises were being broken into. Their goods stolen. Why ? They confessed Jesus Christ to be Lord. Not Caesar.

Here they were destitute. But Christ said *" but thou art rich."* (2:9) The church at Smyrna was materially poor but spiritually rich. Laodicea was materially rich but spiritually poor. Which would you rather be ? Like Smyrna or Laodicea ? Incidentally Christ's set of values is different from the worlds. *" Poor but rich."* We can lack much of this worlds goods yet be *" rich toward God,"* *" rich in faith,"* *" rich in good works,"* *" have treasure in heaven."* (Lk 12:21 James 2:25 1 Tim 6:18 Matt 6:19)

(c) THEY WERE ATTACKED RELIGIOUSLY:

Our Lord says, *" I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan."* (2:9) In Smyrna, there was a large Jewish community that was fanatically hostile against Christianity. They were even blaspheming the believers. *" Blasphemy,"* means slander or speaking against. You see what happened was this. The Jews were beginning to spread lies about the believers, whose reputations were being ruined. They were slandering the Christians, planting lies, stirring up opposition. As at the crucifixion of Christ, these Jewish leaders were inciting the crowd against the Christians. Because these believers celebrated the Lord's Supper, the Jews accused them of eating human flesh.

Because this church refused to worship the gods who were enshrined in the pagan temples, they were called atheists. Christians talked about being members of one another, of loving one another, so they were accused of engaging in sexual orgies. They also accused the Christians of breaking up families because their message called for a highest allegiance to Christ. These Jews, said the Lord were the "

synagogue of Satan." They were instruments of the Devil, used by hell to oppose the people and program's of God. History informs us that the church has often been persecuted by bigoted religionists. Think of the zeal of the Romanists against the Reformers. Think of the apostate churches in our land that are no more than synagogues of Satan. Satan goes to church just like Christians. Every Sunday the devil says,

" I've got some of my preachers I want to hear speak. I've got some of my choirs I want to hear sing. I've got some disciples with whom I want to fellowship this morning." These churches are the strong-holds of Satan. They do not preach the true Gospel of Christ. They deny the inerrancy of Scripture. They cast scorn on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. They have forsaken the Word of God. They are contemplating ordaining homosexuals into the ministry. These "*churches*," are hellholes, instruments of the devil himself.

(d) THEY WERE ATTACKED PHYSICALLY:

" Fear none ten days." (2:10) This church had suffered. This church would suffer. In fact, the Lord guaranteed that the devil was about to cast some of them into prison. Roman prisons were ghastly places. Those imprisoned did not stay long. Either the prison authorities put you to death, or you were severely tortured and flung back onto the streets. Either way nobody stayed long in a Roman prison. The church in Smyrna suffered physically. The Roman officials broke into their homes and arrested the believers before the startled eyes of their family. They dragged them off into Roman prisons and made public examples out of them before a watching world. Christ said they would have, "*tribulation ten days.*" Some Bible students have speculated that these ten days are symbolic of ten successive era's of Roman emperors, or ten consecutive stages of church history. Whatever the precise meaning of "*the ten days*," we can be encouraged to know that " the Lord sets the limits to our suffering. The Lord is Sovereign in every situation. If the Lord says the test will last ten days then there is no force on earth that could make it last eleven days. You see no suffering can engulf us except with His Permission. God would say to the devil in Smyrna, "*Thus far and no further.*" The devil is under the control and sovereignty of Him who walks in the midst of the candlesticks and the gates of hell shall never against His church prevail ! Behind all persecution, whether Political, Economic, Religious stands Satan himself.

(e) THEY WERE ATTACKED SATANICALLY:

He's referred to as Satan in (2:9) and the Devil in (2:10) They were at war with hell itself.

(Eph 6:11-12) Behind the Roman Empire stood the Evil Empire. The Devil unleashed his hellish hatred against believers by inciting unbelievers to be filled with extreme hatred toward them. The result ? Imprisonment, for many death. This church Suffered Deeply. Simultaneously, they suffered persecution on, not one, or two but five fronts.

They were attacked Politically, Economically, Religiously, Physically, and Satanically. Its interesting to observe that there is no rebuke for this church. Out of the seven churches, the Risen Lord rebukes five of them. But for two churches there is no criticism. The other church is Philadelphia. That was another Persecuted church. The lesson is clear. ***Persecution Purifies the Church.***

The greatest blessing that could ever happen to the cause of Christ might be for the church to be persecuted ! Someone has said " *The problem with Christian's these days is no-one wants to kill them anymore.*" Such persecution would melt us down to the bare essentials of what it means to be a genuine follower of the Lord Jesus. How was this church in Smyrna going to make it ? How were they going to bare up in the trials ahead ?

(3) THE SUSTAINING OF THIS CHURCH

Christ says, " *Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer.*" (2: 10) In the place of their fearfulness the Lord wanted their faithfulness. The psalmist said, " *What time I am afraid I will trust in thee.*" (Ps 56:3) The Risen Lord says, " *Fear none of those things and I will give thee a crown of life.*" (2: 10)

(a) THE PRIZE THE RISEN LORD OFFERS:

The city of Smyrna was often called " *the crown of Asia,*" here the Lord Jesus offers the Christians of Smyrna an even better crown, the crown of life which awaits them after death. A special crown, awaits all those who pay the ultimate price to be a follower of the Lamb.

(b) THE PROMISE THE RISEN LORD MAKES:

" *He that over-cometh shall not be hurt of the second death.*" (2:11) Christians can face the first death without fear because the second death has no power over us. (20:14)

(c) THE PERSON THE RISEN LORD IS:

To the church that is under pressure,

(1) THE RISEN LORD IS THE LASTING ONE:

" *The first and the last.*" (2:8) From eternity past to eternity future, the Lord Jesus has been, is, and will always be the eternal and infinite one. What kind of perspective does a suffering church need ? An eternal perspective ! Remember that Jesus Christ existed before time, that He rules over time and that He will reign for all time. What we suffer here is insignificant to the eternal glory that awaits us there.

(2) THE RISEN LORD IS THE LIVING ONE:

" Which was dead and is alive." (2:8) We live and die. Christ died and lived. The shadow of death was daily hanging over this little flock at Smyrna. So Christ stands before them and says

" I am the living one, I have robbed death of its sting, of its fear I am the Lord of your departure, for I hold in my hand the keys of death." The Living Lord Jesus is in control of the *timing, manner, and place of death.*

(3) THE RISEN LORD IS THE LOVING ONE:

He says, *" I know."* (2:9) That word know (oida) means the kind of knowledge that comes by personal experience. It also means to appreciate, respect, or value the worthiness of a person or thing. When Christ says, *" I know your tribulation,"* He is saying, *" I know exactly what you're going through. I know because I've been there. I know what your tribulation feels like. I know what it is to be falsely accused, physically harmed, and spit upon. I know what you are suffering and I respect you greatly for it. I highly value your commitment to Me."* The Lord knew all about Polycarp the friend of the apostle John. In AD 155 at the age of 86, Polycarp, probably the leader of the church at Smyrna was summoned before the Roman proconsul. He was told to swear allegiance to Caesar and blaspheme Christ. He said, *" Eighty and six years have I served the Lord Jesus. He has been faithful to me. How can I be faithless to Him, and blaspheme the name of my Saviour ?"* Even threatened with death by wild beasts Polycarp remained true. Finally the Jews and Gentiles of Smyrna gathered wood on the Jewish Sabbath and used it to burn Polycarp alive.

There he stood by the stake asking not to be tied to it and he prayed, *" O Lord I thank Thee that thou hast thought me worthy of this hour."* He bowed his head and said *" Amen,"* as the fires consumed him at the stake. Polycarp was faithful until death. Wang Ming Dao was a Chinese pastor who had been led to Christ by another Chinese. At the time of the Communist takeover, he was pasturing the largest church in what was then Peking. He was tolerated for a couple of years then thrown into prison by the Communists because of his testimony and ministry. While, in prison, under torture, afraid of ever more suffering he recanted his faith and was therefore released by the authorities. In the day and weeks that followed, Wang Ming Dao was seen wandering through the streets of the city weeping and mumbling, *" I am Judas, I have betrayed my Lord."* Unable to bear his shame, he went to the authorities confessed his faith in Christ and asked to be placed in prison. The authorities complied with his request and he was imprisoned for another twenty-seven years. When released once again, at the end of his life Wang Ming Dao was considered by the Chinese church as a hero of the faith he had once recanted. My there is a Wang

Ming Dao in each of us. Fear of the world has ensnared us.

Our tendency is to dilute the gospel and to lower our standards in order not to give offence. We love the praise of our fellow human beings more than the praise of God. My are you afraid ? Are you fearful of further criticism ? Of permanent rejection, of increased persecution and because of that, you are backing down, you're compromising, you are silencing your testimony ? The Lord Jesus says, “ *Fear none of those things,*” “ *Don't be afraid.*” Take God's peace, maintain your testimony and leave the consequences to Him !