

Place: Lurgan Baptist 8:8:2010

Reading: Revelation 2:8-11

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE LUKEWARM

3. SMYRNA: THE FEARFUL CHURCH

Polycarp was the friend of the apostle John, and probably one of the leaders of the church at Smyrna. In AD 155 at the age of 86, he 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. Did the Lord Jesus not warn us that 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, what is the second mark ? **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. Fittingly, its one of the two churches along with Philadelphia that received no rebuke in this letter from the Lord of the Lampstands. Now the city of Smyrna itself is a very interesting city, and also gives us some clues as to the background of this letter that John wrote to this church.

1. Smyrna was a Refined City:

Many have called it "*the glory of the east.*" F. A. Tatford points out that the "*city became dead and lived again.*" In 600 BC it was destroyed by the Lydians and for four centuries its name was lost to history but it was restored and became an autonomous Greek city. It was known as "*the city that became dead and lived again.*" Prince Charles would have approved of the layout of this city. Smyrna was a model of that town planning should be. It was famous for its straight, spacious streets, which ran from one end of the city to the other. Of course all over Smyrna was dotted Greek Temples to Cybele, Apollo, Asclepias, Aphrodite and Zeus. This was the birthplace of the Greek poet Homer. This was the city designed and built by Alexander the Great. A place where the arts, education, philosophy and the

sciences flourished.

2. Smyrna was a Rich City:

Its 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. 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.

3. Smyrna was a Religious City:

This was a city that was renowned for its faithfulness to Rome. Her allegiance to Caesar was unquestioned. Now because of all this, Smyrna was a thriving centre for Roman emperor worship. 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. Smyrna was no easy place to be a Christian. Naming Christ in Smyrna was far more life threatening than anywhere else in Asia, yet it was here in this hotbed of suffering that this little assembly lived and laboured for the Lord, yet He knew all about it, for He is,

(1) THE CHRIST OF OBSERVATION

For He says, “ *I know*,” (2:9) Now there are some things we don't know about this church. This is the only record we have of Smyrna in the New Testament.

(Acts 19:10) An early tradition does claim that Paul visited the town on his way to Ephesus at the beginning of his third missionary journey. But what we don't know He does. Notice what Christ takes note of. He notes,

(a) THE PERSECUTION THEY ENDURED:

Do you see what the Lord says, ? “ *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. You see, once a year the citizens of Smyrna had to burn a pinch on incense on the altar to the godhead of Caesar, and call Caesar Lord. Now if these Smyrnan believers had just been willing to do that little thing, they would have been accepted and loved throughout the city. But these magnificent saints were descendants of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who would not bend, bow or budge. They would not compromise. The result ?

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. My I'm not talking about Common suffering, I'm speaking about Christian suffering. There are some people who think if they have a headache they are suffering for Jesus. Have you ever taken a " *beating because you are a believer* ?" Is " *persecution*," foreign to our way of thinking ? Well, Christ says, " *I know*," and its not the " *I know*," of omniscience, it's the " *I know*," of experience. He who had been to Gethsemane knew what crushing was and He says to this suffering church, " *I know*." What about you ? Are under pressure because you a Christian ? Is there pressure at home, pressure with your spouse, pressure at work, at university when you mention the name of Christ ? Are there times when you feel like giving up ? Listen, He says to you this, " *I know*." Perhaps it's the pressure of caring for aged parents, of loneliness, of business, of daily life. Is the pressure of unsaved and unruly children ? Do you think Christ doesn't know what you are going through ? Or that He knows but doesn't care ? Nothing could be further from the truth. He knows every pinpoint of pain and every little flicker of feeling you endure and He cares. (a)

(b) THE POVERTY THEY EXPERIENCED:

For Christ says, " 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*. Now in such a rich city why were these saints so poor ? Well, the economic life of Smyrna was built around these gods and goddesses. Every man that worked belonged to a guild, a trade union. Each trade union had a patron god, they were devoted to. The only way to get into these guilds and work, and make a living was to worship their particular god. Now if you didn't worship one of these gods, you couldn't get into a guild, if you could not get into a guild, you could not have a job. If you could not get a job you couldn't buy or sell and if you couldn't buy or sell you could not eat. ***So if you trusted Christ in Smyrna you had to live hand to mouth.***

These saints at Smyrna were poor.. Are you ? Do you find yourself through no fault of your own without a job ? Has the recession hit your business ? Are you financially not where you once were ? My He knows, cares and understands. These believers were destitute yet Christ says, " *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 world's 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) THE PROFANITY THEY ENCOUNTERED:

For 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. 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 ordaining homosexuals into the ministry. These “*churches,*” are hellholes, instruments of the devil himself. And Christ says, “*I know.*” (1)

(2) THE CHRIST OF INFORMATION

You see, not only does the Lord observe this church, He informs this church. This church had suffered, this church would suffer. Do you see what the Lord says in (2:10) ? Roman prisons were ghastly places yet some of the Christian saints that have ever come out of the Christian faith had their greatest hours in prison. You see, some of these believers were going to be tested. Indeed the Lord informs them about,

(a) THE PURPOSE IN THIS SUFFERING:

“*That ye may be tried,*” (2:10) You see, God always has a goal in suffering and it is to test you. That word test literally means “*to refine.*” It means to separate the dross from the gold. It means to mature and mold. Do you recall what the Lord said to Peter ? “*Simon,*

Simon behold Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat.” (Lk 22:31) Satan’s sifting was not designed to eliminate the chaff, but to destroy the wheat. You see, the Lord tests us in order to develop us, Satan tempts us in order to destroy us. Satan’s temptations are designed to trip and harm us and destroy the wheat of God’s work in us. The poet puts it like this.

**Oh, not for Thee my weak desires
My poorer baser self
Oh not for Thee my fading fires
The ashes of my heart**

Is this not Satan’s purpose in relation to your life ? He wants you to waste your time, talents, energies, even your money on other things, so that you will have nothing left but ashes to be used for the Lord. Satan tempts in order to destroy, the Lord tests in order to develop. Do you feel imprisoned this because of some difficult trial ? Will you look beyond the trial to its purpose ? Will you look beyond the pain to its profit ?

(b) THE PERIOD OF THIS SUFFERING:

“ *And ye shall have tribulation ten days,*” (2:10) 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. No suffering can engulf us without His permission. Do you recall Job ? How that the Lord let, yet the Lord limited. (Job 1:12) Do you recall Judah ? How that the Lord let the Assyrians surround Jerusalem ? Yet the Lord limited the Assyrian’s from sacking Jerusalem.

(2 Kings 19:35) You see, God would say to the devil in Smyrna, “ Thus far and no further.” Aren’t you glad this that the devil is under the control and sovereignty of Him who walks in the midst of the candlesticks ? Aren’t you glad that the gates of hell shall never against His church prevail ? So the Lord informs them here about (a) (b) and,

(c) THE PRIZE FOR THIS SUFFERING:

“ *Be thou faithful unto death,*” (2:10) “ *He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.*” (2:11) A lot of discussion surrounds those who are described as “ *overcomers.*” Jim Allen says, “ *The promises to the overcomers offer only what is the common heritage of all believers. It is to be carefully noted that all that is promised in the seven promises to the overcomers is detailed in the final three chapters of the book as the Eternal State is described. In that Eternal State there are only two classes, the saved and the lost.*” (22:7-8) I am so glad that the Risen Lord said “ *be faithful,*” instead of “ *be successful.*” If He had said “ *Be successful,*” many of us would not have that crown. But He said, “ *Be faithful,*” The lesson is clear. ***Persecution Purifies the Church.*** My 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. The problem is we shrink from suffering. Yet suffering is the second mark of a true church and Christian. What a catalogue of suffering the apostle Paul endured. On one occasion when they sought to dissuade him from going up to Jerusalem he said, “ *What mean ye to weep and break mine heart ? for I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.*”

(Acts 21:13) But what about us ? We don't suffer much as believers. ***The truth is that we avoid suffering by compromise.*** I mean nothing provokes the world's opposition more than the gospel. For the gospel underscores such unpalatable doctrines as the reality of sin, the impossibility of saving yourself, the necessity of the cross, the need for repentance, the danger of hell. These truths undermine human pride and arouse human opposition, so preachers are tempted to dilute the gospel and make it more acceptable. They love the praise of man more than the praise of God. My are the Bible's moral standards not unpopular ?

Honesty in business, purity before marriage, fidelity after marriage, contentment in the place of covetousness, self-control and self-sacrifice. ***What do you think what happen if the church raised its standards and rebuked sin ?*** We would suffer. There would be an outcry. I'm not saying that we should court opposition. I am saying if we compromised less we

would suffer more. Smyrna was a suffering church because it was an uncompromising church. They had suffered, they would suffer. How was this church in Smyrna going to make it ? How were they going to bare up in the trials ahead ?

(3) THE CHRIST OF CONSOLATION

Christ says, “ *Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer.*” (2:10) In the place of their fearfulness the Lord wanted their faithfulness. Now faith and fear are opposites. They cannot co-exist. Faith banishes fear. The psalmist said, “ *What time I am afraid I will trust in thee.*” (Ps 56:3) The call here is to faithfulness rather than faith, but faith and faithfulness are the same word in the Greek. The way to lose fear is to gain faith. Have you discovered that in a time of affliction, your faith falters ? How then can our trust in Christ grow, so that whether in storm or sunshine we will put our whole confidence in Him ? The answer is that Christ is worthy of our unquestioning faith because of who He is. You see, to the church that is under pressure,

(a) ***THR RISEN LORD IS THE LASTING ONE:***

“ *The first and the last.*” (2:8) That's ***His Deity.*** (1 Tim 6:16) 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.

***He gives the very best
To those who leave the choice to Him***

(2) THE RISEN LORD IS THE LIVING ONE:

“ *Which was dead and is alive.* ” (2:8) That’s **His Humanity.** We live and die. Christ died and lived. Now think of this. 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.* ” Does that not cheer your soul ? The Living Lord Jesus is in control of the *timing, manner, and place of your death.*

(3) THE RISEN LORD IS THE LOVING ONE:

He says, “ *I know.* ” (2:9) That’s **His Scrutiny.** 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. I know.* ” He knows every tear you shed, every pang you feel, every burden you bear, every problem you have.

***He knows, He cares,
Nothing this truth can dim***

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 pastoring 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.