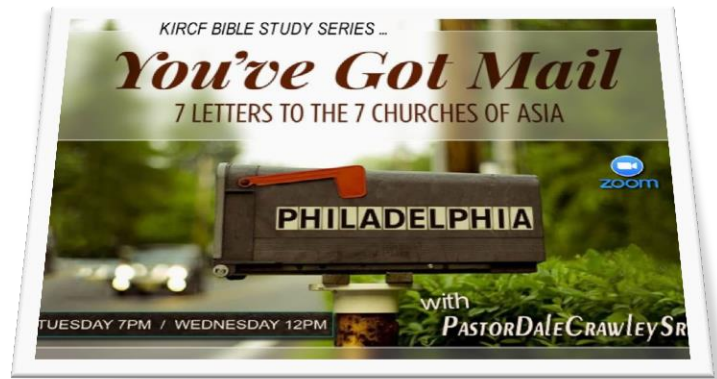


2 – SMYRNA: “The Suffering Church”



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“⁸ 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: ⁹ "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. 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. ¹¹ "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." Rev. 2:8-11

FAITH UNDER FIRE

Christians in America and most developed countries today think very little about being persecuted for their faith. But there are churches in the world where such persecution is a daily reality. Such was the case for the ancient church in Smyrna. They suffered because of pressure, poverty, and persecution (Revelation 2:9). Christ's words to that church can prepare all believers for what might surely come.

The first letter to Ephesus “the loveless church” – was a call to return to Love. Love is the primary distinctive mark of the church; but love for God and love for one another – those aren't the only distinctive marks of the church.

Suffering is also a mark of the church and a mark of the Christian life.

Jesus promised to His followers that they would suffer: The Apostle Paul promised to his brothers and sisters in Christ that they would suffer ... The Apostle John promised his brothers and sisters in Christ that they would suffer ... ***And Jesus is promising the church here*** – and all of Revelation is a promise to the Church that all throughout the age between Christ's first coming at the incarnation and His second coming at the last day – ***that suffering will characterize the life of the Church in this world!***

How Jesus describes Himself (2:8) indicates the kind of message He is going to give to the church in Smyrna. These are the words of the one who has died and has come back to life. Keep that description in mind ... as we read about what is going to happen to these Christians.

Smyrna, like Ephesus, was a proud and beautiful city. Smyrna also had earned the right to be self-governing. It had a large library, stadium, and the largest public theater in Asia.

Perhaps even more important, the city had become a center for the cult of emperor worship. Smyrna received permission (over several other cities who requested) to build a temple to the emperor Tiberius in 23 B.C.. **Under the emperor Domitian (who ruled from A.D. 81 to 96), emperor worship was required for all Roman citizens. Those who refused could receive the death penalty.**

Once a year, all citizens were required to burn incense on an altar to Caesar, after which they would receive a certificate proving that they had done their civil duty. While this was more an act of political loyalty than a religious act ... the citizen had to say, while burning the incense, "**Caesar is lord.**" Christians considered this act blasphemous and refused to do it.

In addition to being a center for the imperial cult, Smyrna also had a large Jewish population that actively opposed the Christians. Thus, the church in this city struggled against two hostile forces: a Gentile population that was loyal to Rome and supported emperor worship and a large Jewish population strongly opposed to Christianity.

- Revelation 2:9 *"I know about your suffering and your poverty -- but you are rich! I know the slander of those opposing you. They say they are Jews, but they really aren't because theirs is a synagogue of Satan."* (NLT)

The church in Smyrna was suffering because of persecution, and believers faced poverty even in this wealthy city. This probably refers to material poverty because Christ immediately assured them that despite their poverty, they were rich -- referring to their heavenly riches (see James 2:5). **These Christians' poverty may have come from sanctions against them ... as part of the persecution they faced.**

Christ told the believers in Smyrna, who had already been facing persecution and suffering, that they ought not to be afraid of what they were about to suffer. **More was coming** ... yet they should remember that although the Jews and Roman authorities were carrying out the persecution, behind any actions against them was the Devil himself.

Satan would cause some of the believers to be thrown into prison and even be killed. He would put the believers to the test -- that is, he would test their faith. Jesus had told his disciples, **"Don't be afraid of those who want to kill you. They can only kill your body; they cannot touch your soul"** (Matt 10:28 NLT).

The persecution would continue for **"ten days"** -- probably symbolizing that although persecution would be intense ... it would be relatively short and have a definite beginning and end. God was in complete control. The church was challenged to remain faithful to Christ even when facing death.

The message to the Smyrna church was to remain faithful during their suffering because God is in control and because His promises are reliable. Jesus never taught that by being faithful to him, believers would avoid troubles, suffering, and persecution. And Jesus' call here to the Church in Smyrna, is a call to faithfulness in the midst of suffering.

Be Fearless

"Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer" (Revelation 2:10). Because Christ is Lord over all of life's circumstances, we have nothing to fear. Paul wrote that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:35-39). Fear is a natural human response, but we live supernatural lives through the power of Christ in us.

Be Faithful

"Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Revelation 2:10). Given the intensity of the persecution in Smyrna, I believe Christ was saying, "Yes, you may lose your life for My sake, but be faithful until the end."

Don't let difficult times turn you away from God. Remember that when you suffer, Christ suffers with you because you belong to Him (Phil. 3:10). Allow your suffering to draw you toward greater faithfulness. Trust God, and remember your heavenly reward (also see 22:12-14). Out of suffering will come the crown of life!

"You've Got Mail ..."