

4 March 2007

Smyrna: The “Poor” Church that God Called “Rich”

Revelation 2:8-11

The Lord’s message to the church at Smyrna was short and to the point. It certainly sounds as though it was a most appropriate word to Christians whose very lives were in danger. But we live in Canada in the 21st century, not in Asia Minor in the 1st century. Freedom of religion is guaranteed in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The Mayors of White Rock and Surrey are kindly disposed to the Christian church, our Member of Parliament is a committed Christian and so is the Prime Minister.

We are fortunate indeed. Our situation is very different from that of our sisters and brothers in the church at Smyrna to whom this message was addressed. We may find it interesting in a remote kind of way, but we can hardly find it relevant.

Not so fast! In more ways than we realize, this message addresses us today. The seven churches represent the universal church throughout the entire church age. Like those early Christians at Smyrna, we today are involved in a spiritual battle. As we travel through these messages to the seven churches, we are going to discover that there are three aspects or dimensions to this battle. There is a *physical* dimension, a *mental* dimension and a *moral* dimension. The church comes under pressure in three ways. In the “physical” battle, strong pressure is brought to bear on the church in order to get us to *capitulate*. In the mental battle, subtle pressure is exerted in order to get us to *conform*. And in the moral battle, relentless pressure is applied to get us to drop our guard and *compromise*.

As far as the church at Smyrna was concerned, the accent fell on the first of these. They were experiencing victimization and persecution. And, as we shall see, even this aspect of the battle has more to do with us than we usually imagine. First let’s understand exactly what the Christians at Smyrna were up against. Let’s visit the spectacular city of Smyrna.

I IF “QUALITY OF LIFE” WAS WHAT YOU WERE AFTER, SMYRNA WAS THE PLACE TO LIVE

- A. The city was on the west coast of Asia Minor, but in certain respects, it could have been on the west coast of North America. As in all the other cities, the situation in society had a vital bearing on the church.
- B. Let me introduce you to this great city in an unusual way. Imagine that you are part of a touring party.
 - 1. The year is AD 96. Instead of taking the overland route, we set sail from Ephesus. Our voyage is a short one; as the crow flies, Smyrna is only fifty

kilometres from Ephesus. We sail into its excellent natural harbour. Before we even disembark, we are struck by the stunning beauty of the place. The streets are wide; the city grid was intentionally designed. The population is relatively large but all the main sights are concentrated in one area, so we can take a walking tour of the city centre.

2. Running down the centre of the city is the famous boulevard, known as Golden Street. At the far end of that street but not too far from the harbour is Mt. Pagus. Its proximity to the city makes it seem particularly impressive as buildings nestle up against its slopes. What makes it even more eye-catching is the way the Golden Street curves around the mountain, “like a necklace on the statue of a goddess.”¹
3. As we make our way from the harbour towards the mountain, our travel guide points out the major buildings. Here, right in front of us, is the Temple of Cybele. It’s the first of the magnificent buildings we meet. But further along there is another impressive temple. This one is to Apollo. Soon we come across a third temple. This is to Asklepios. Look over here; that is a temple to Aphrodite.”

But another building catches our eye. “And, what’s that splendid building perched up there where the Golden Street meets the foothills of Mt. Pagus?” “Oh, that’s the Temple of Zeus,” says our guide, “As you can see, there is no shortage of religion in this city. And, what’s more, we insist that every year citizens burn the pinch of incense to the deity of Caesar and declare him Lord. In fact, we’ve closed all the loopholes; no-one gets away with non-compliance.”

4. “But let me give you a little background. It is not by chance that they call this city ‘The Glory of Asia’. You can see clear signs of affluence among the citizens? The standard of living here is about as good as it gets – anywhere. And if you engage in the citizens in conversation, they will soon tell you how pleased they are to live here and how proud they are to be citizens of Smyrna.” Guides usually like to give you a bit of history . . . “The city’s been around a long time, but it was completely rebuilt in 290 BC. Then, in 195 BC, it was the very first city to build a temple to *Dea Roma*, the goddess of Rome. In AD 26, it vied with six other cities to erect a temple to the godhead of Emperor Tiberius – *and won*.”
5. “But let me point out a few more of the landmarks. Over here is a monument to the poet Homer, who was born in Smyrna. You can’t miss the public theatre; it’s the largest in Asia. Later, we’ll visit the stadium

¹ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation: Revised Edition* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), 73.

which is one of the finest in the Empire and attracts the best athletes in the area.”

6. One of the tour group asks a question. “I hear that there is a Christian church in Smyrna. Where do they meet; I did not notice a building nor have I seen any emblem to indicate their existence?”

The guide hesitates and attempts to conceal his distaste: “Oh,” he says with a dull tone in his voice, “they exist, but we prefer not to talk about them. They’re poor and they’re obstinate. As you know, we are proud to be part of this great empire and they won’t honour Caesar in the normal way. They really don’t fit in here. To be honest, we wish they’d leave of their own accord. But, one way or the other, we’re not going to stand by and see Smyrna lose its good reputation in the empire.”

Such was Smyrna, “the glory of Asia,” “a paradise of municipal vanity,” with a standard of living second to none, beautiful, prosperous, impressive and civilized, a wonderful place to live -- *that is, unless you were a Christian.*

II LISTEN TO WHAT THE LORD HAD TO SAY TO THIS CHURCH

There were six things they needed to see. As different as our situation may seem, we need to know the same six things.

A. **They needed to see to Lord for who he is – and so do we.**

These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.

1. Before anything was, he was there. When the last word of human history has been spoken, he will be there. Richard Bauckham points out just how remarkable this designation is. It not only “includes (Jesus) in the eternal being of the one God of Israel”; not only is he the first and the last in relation to creation, but he is also the first and last in relation to the church.”²
2. When we are up against it and it looks as though we our outgunned, we must remember another day in human history when evil seemed totally triumphant. The Lord of glory died. But on the third day he rose, thus demonstrating that through his death he had won a great victory. It is as the one who died and came to life again that he now addresses them.

² Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 55, 58.

3. No circumstance can ever arise in your life that falls outside of his control. If the situation looks dismal, remember how dismal it looked on Good Friday. Before he speaks a word to the beleaguered believers in Smyrna, the Lord reminds them of his encounter with death. He had died but had come to life again. They needed to remember that – and so do we.

B. They needed to see that he had not forgotten them - and so do we.

I know your affliction and your poverty - yet you are rich. I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan

The words used in this clause have precise meanings.

1. The word translated “affliction” (*thlipsis*) is particularly significant. It is used in classical Greek to describe the pressure a man who was being tortured to death experienced when he was being crushed by a huge boulder being laid upon him.³ It is used forty-three times in the New Testament. An examination of its usage convinces us that it is not used in a general sense to describe hardship that is part and parcel of life on the planet. It is not referring to your arthritis, your backache or some difficulty in your general circumstances. It is never used of the normal frustrations.

“*Thlipsis*,” says Darrell Johnson, “is the pressure experienced along the line where kingdoms clash; along the line where the kingdom of light clashes with the kingdom of darkness . . . *Thlipsis* is the pressure experienced when idols are being unmasked. *Thlipsis* is the pressure experienced where human pride is confronted with the call to repentance.”⁴

2. The word translated “poverty” here gives us some insight into the situation of the Christians in that affluent city. It is not the regular word that is used to describe poverty. That was *penia* and it referred to someone who was poor. He or she had no money for luxuries and had to scrimp and scrape to make ends meet. The word used here is *ptocheia*. It means destitute – penniless. In this affluent community Christians were impoverished. That’s probably because they were ostracised. It is possible that their shops were confiscated and their homes ransacked. I think of how the Writer to the Hebrews commended those to whom he wrote calling to remembrance that they had “joyfully accepted the confiscation of their property.” (Heb 10:34) There were situations elsewhere in which informants were entitled to the property of those whom they reported.

³ William Barclay, *Letters to the Seven Churches* (London: SCM Press, 1957), 40.

⁴ Darrell W. Johnson, *Discipleship on the Edge: An Expository Journey through the Book of Revelation* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2004), 67.

Could this have happened at Smyrna? Imagine if part of the cost of being a Christian was impoverishment.

3. But listen to how the Lord evaluates their situation. “I know your afflictions and your poverty - yet you are rich! How interesting. When he addresses the church at Laodicea, the Lord says: “You say ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked” (3:17). Here he tells these destitute Christians that they are, in fact, rich.
4. Part of the problem was the slander (*blasphēmian*) of those “who say they are Jews and are not but are a synagogue of Satan.” There was a large and prosperous population of Jews in Smyrna. We know from Paul’s missionary journeys that many in the Jewish Diaspora resented the proclamation of the gospel. Johnson refers to “the fierce hostility of a segment of the Jewish community, not the whole community.”⁵ The Jews were exempted from the responsibility of burning a pinch of incense on the altar and saying, “Caesar is Lord” and some may have resorted to misinformation in an attempt to make the distinction between them and the Christians clear to the authorities. Whatever the motive, they are not true Jews. They no longer deserve the title “synagogue of the Lord”, but are a synagogue of Satan, the great “accuser of our brothers” (12:10).

C. They needed to see the real origin of their suffering – and so do we.

The devil will put some of you into prison to test you and you will suffer persecution for ten days.

1. When we consider the various factors in the city – the strength of heathenism, Jewish opposition and the city’s commitment to emperor worship, it is possible to find a purely sociological explanation for the plight of the Christians.
2. But the Lord makes it clear that behind all these factors is the sinister hand of Satan. The *devil* will throw some of you into prison. We are understandably reluctant to see the devil’s hand in every unfavourable development. Stuff happens. But have we not over-reacted to those who see a demon behind every bush (no pun intended)? Scripture takes the devil seriously and so should we. He is the inveterate enemy of the people of God because his is implacably opposed to God. John White reminds us not to take it personally: “Satan’s supreme object is to hurt Christ and Christ’s cause. You personally are of no interest to him. It is only as you

⁵ Johnson, *Discipleship on the Edge*, 69.

relate to Christ that you assume significance in the enemy's eyes."⁶
Instead of seeing things on the surface, we need to realize that to belong to Christ is to be part of a bigger battle.

D. They needed to see that they had nothing to fear – and so do we.

Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer.

The Lord's reassurance does not come in the form of a promise of immunity. There is no exemption from suffering. A storm is about to break and the Lord is not going to prevent it. Yet he tells them not to be afraid. There are two important reasons that neither they nor we need to fear "what (we) are about to suffer".

1. While Satan wanted to destroy them, God wanted to refine them. Exactly the same applies to you? What from Satan's point of view is an attempt to crush us is, from the Lord's point of view, an opportunity to refine us. How the church has benefited as a result of times of testing! Peter speaks of the grief we may have to experience through "all kinds of trials." Significantly, he adds: "these have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Pet 1:7).
2. What's more, God sets the limit. The Lord tells them that they will suffer persecution "for ten days".⁷ He always does determine the extent of what we will be allowed to suffer. Sometimes it seems that we are pushed right to the edge of our endurance, but Paul makes it abundantly clear that we are never pushed beyond that point: "God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it" (1 Cor 10:13).

E. They needed to know that their faithfulness would be richly rewarded – and so do we.

Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.

1. There is no guarantee of an invisible shield around them granting them immunity from suffering in this life, but there is an infinitely better promise. "Be faithful even to the point of death and I will give you the crown of life." Smyrna was renowned for its stadium and the games that

⁶ John White, *The Fight: A Practical Handbook to Christian Living* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1976)

⁷ The "ten days" in this passage need not be taken as a literal period of ten, twenty-four hour days. It is simply a fixed rather than an indefinite period. The numbers in the Revelation are symbols, not statistics.

took place there. The word translated crown here is *stephanos* – the highly-prized wreath that was awarded to the winner at the games. As significant a prize as it was, the victor’s garland would ultimately wither. The crown of life, which is our inheritance, will never perish, spoil or fade.

2. Some here will be familiar with the story of Jim Elliot, who was martyred in Ecuador. He knew when he took the gospel to the Huaorani Indians, that he was taking his life in his hands. But long before that he had settled the matter in his own mind. This was articulated in his most famous quotation: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”
3. The Lord adds the promise: “He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.” We read of the second death three other times at the end of the book. (20:6, 14; 21:8) The first death is the death we all die. The second death is eternal expulsion from the presence of God. Jesus does not promise any of us immunity from the first death. We are all going to die. But he does guarantee us immunity from the second death. William Barclay put it so well: “The man who is faithful unto death dies to live; but the man who saves his life . . . at the price of his loyalty to Christ lives to die.”⁸

F. They needed to see that by suffering as they were they were actually winning a great victory – and so do we.

1. That, of course, is one of the main points of the Book of Revelation. It is as a little lamb, that the Lion of the tribe of Judah triumphs (5:5-6). A cosmic battle is raging. If its outcome was determined purely by power and might, there could only be one victor. Who can stand against the *Pantokratōr* – the Almighty? But God does not resort to raw power to win the all-important victory. It is through suffering that he saves us and it is through death that he destroys death.

The church’s saddest day was when she used a position of power in an attempt to enforce her will. It is possible to compel outward compliance in this way but not to win hearts. Often, when in worldly terms, the church is at her weakest, she is at her most powerful. (“I know . . . your poverty – yet you are rich”). The might of Rome was unable to resist the witness of a suffering church.

2. Today Smyrna (Izmir) is the most Christian city in Turkey. There has been a Christian witness there for two thousand years. Modern Izmir is a

⁸ Barclay, *Letters*, 45.

vibrant centre of eastern Orthodox worship and education. I am told that about half the inhabitants of that city are Christian.

3. When this letter arrived, there was, living at Smyrna, a young man in his twenties. His name was Polycarp and he would certainly have heard the book read (and maybe have read it himself). One day, some 60 years later during a celebration in the municipal stadium, it was decided to feed eleven Christians to the lions. They suffered so courageously that the crowd began to call for the blood of Polycarp, now the much-loved bishop of Smyrna.

He was arrested and brought to the stadium. The consul was amazed to see how old the man was and attempted to persuade him to recant. "Have respect to your age", he said, "Swear by the fortune of Caesar, denounce the Christians and I will release you." Polycarp's reply has gone down in history: "Eighty-and-six years have I served him and he has done me no wrong; how can I blaspheme my king who has saved me?"

They continued to plead but he stood firm. Eventually he was burned at the stake. He died with his eye upon the one who had said,

I am the First and the Last
I am the Living One
I was dead and behold I am alive forever and ever.
And I hold the keys of death and of Hades.

Polycarp's death was such a triumph that the church of Smyrna decided to circulate an account of his martyrdom. Significantly, they concluded the account with these significant words: "Quintus Statius Quadratus being Consul, but Jesus Christ being King, forever."

This kind of persecution was not confined to the first three centuries. For nearly two thousand years people have chosen to suffer and, if needs be, to die rather than renounce their faith in Jesus. In Canada we are not required to do obeisance to the deity of political leaders.

But some things do not change. Jesus did not locate the reason for persecution in the socio-political circumstances of the day. He said, "No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also." (John 15:20) The biblical perspective on persecution is enlightening. In this world darkness hates light. From the time of Cain and Abel, this principle has been at work (1 John 3:11-13; cf. Gal 4:29). Paul makes the same point to Timothy: "*Everyone* who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim 3:12; my italics).

Instead of bemoaning the fact, we should see genuine persecution as a privilege. Didn't the Lord say, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Mt 5:11-12)? And, isn't that exactly what the early Christians did? When they were flogged and ordered not to speak in the name of Jesus, "the apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name" (Acts 5:41).

Yes it is true that some Christians mistakenly developed an almost morbid fascination with the idea of martyrdom and that some have suffered because of their own stupidity (1 Pet 2:19-20; 4:15-16). But genuine suffering for Christ is a gift rather than a burden: "For it has been *granted* to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him" (Phil 1:29; cf. Mark 10:29, 30; my italics).

Conclusion

Perhaps you have read accounts of the heroic stand taken by martyrs who "did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death" (12:11) and wondered how you would fare if you were called upon to lay down your life for Christ. Would you be able to heed the Lord's call to "be faithful, even to the point of death"? That's a question that can only be answered at the time. God certainly gives special grace in such circumstances. But right now, we are called upon to take a clear, and possibly costly, stand for him in situations that are not life-threatening. And Jesus reminds us that "whoever is faithful in very little is faithful also in much" (Luke 16:10).