

# **The Church Under Pressure - Smyrna**

**Text:** Revelation 2:8-11

Revelation 2:8-11 – “And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive;” “I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.” “Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.” “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.”

## **I. INTRODUCTION – THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF ASIA**

-The pattern by which the Lord addresses the angel of each church is found in looking at this segment of Scripture in this manner:

- The Commission
- The Character
- The Commendation
- The Condemnation
- The Correction
- The Call
- The Challenge

-Yet when we come to the second church, Smyrna, there is no condemnation given to this church. There was so much external pressure being exerted on this church. In fact there are only two churches of the seven that are given no condemnation and need for correction: Smyrna and Philadelphia.

## **II. THE CHURCH OF SMYRNA**

### **A. Background and History of the City of Smyrna**

-The city of Smyrna had a long and honorable history behind it. One thousand

years before the earthly ministry of Christ, this colony had been established. Seven centuries prior to the arrival of Christ, this city had gone down in defeat to the Asiatic Lydians and would remain that way for three hundred years.

-At the end of this three hundred years, there had been some staunch Greek reserves who took back over and brought it back to its former state. In the second century B.C. this city had developed into one of Rome's strongest allies and gained even more strength.

-Smyrna was one of the most beautiful cities of its day. Some historians even debate that Smyrna was the most elegant city that the Grecians ever built. The city sloped down toward the sea and along the sides of the hill was a very large amphitheater where over twenty-thousand people could sit. It was there that worship to Caesar was granted. Kaiser Curios. . . . Caesar is Lord!

-Those who refused to embrace this total act of allegiance became marked men and were duly noted as traitors of the government. To be Christian in the Roman Empire during that bloody era of history was to live in jeopardy every single day. The tortures that were inflicted on this men are almost unspeakable.

-Some of the Christians in the early church were placed in a rack that bore chains. Their hands and their feet were chained and every time that the believer was asked to deny the Lord, if he did not the chains were tightened to such an extent that they would actually be ripped from limb to limb. Others were thrown to lions. Others were literally cooked alive in boiling pots of hot oil.

Hebrews 11:35-39 – “Women received their dead raised to life again: and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection:” “And others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment:” “They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented;” “(Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.” “And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise:”

-The church at Smyrna was pulled apart by pressure, poverty, and persecution.

Yet, there is no commendation given to them. The Lord has no complaint to utter. The character and conduct of the church at Smyrna was such that it was above reproach.

-The pressure that this church was under made terrible demands upon them. But their spirit allowed them to pass through such without complaint. There is no greater work of grace than for one to suffer wrongfully and yet show through it all a very gracious spirit.

-The Lord watched these saints at Smyrna and their spirit under tribulation was an incredible mark. The higher points of our walk with God will only be revealed under bruising and pressure, as the fragrance of fine spices is only gained through crushing.

-The church at Smyrna mirrored a Lord who had endured the terrible experiences of the Cross, endured a violent grace, endured the shame of provocative men and still did not fall prey to anger and resentment. That is a high calling to reach for.

-The Lord simply says, "I know thy works." Otherwise, silence prevails. Some child of God may be at this point, overwhelmed with great and crushing sorrow, that child of God may be longing to hear the voice of God, but the silence may be a sign not of disapproval but of approval.

## **B. Three Things Those At Smyrna Faced**

-In the segment of Scripture, there were some things the Lord stated that He knew the church at Smyrna faced.

### **1. The Tribulation They Faced**

-The word used in this context is THLIPSIS. The word is used here to give indication to the pressure of stones used to grind wheat or to crush grapes. It is a word that throbs with meaning. This church was being pressed even to their own deaths on account of their devotion to God.

"I know thy thlipsis, the crushing, the pressure of persecution and sorrow and death."

## 2. The Poverty They Faced

-The word used here in this context is PTOCHOEIA. The word actually means “beggarly.” The Christians at Smyrna had been reduced to such a state of poverty that they were beggars.

-The question arises: Why were these saints so destitute? Smyrna was one of the richest cities in Ancient Rome, yet the saints at Smyrna had been reduced to being beggars.

They were almost without exception poor anyway. Far too many account success and greatness in terms of riches, fame, and fortune. God just needs ordinary, plain people whom He can fill with His power to do extraordinary things. They were severely persecuted. They were deprived of a right to work. No trade union would have them. No business would hire them. They were boycotted on every hand. They lived in destitution and want.

I know thy thilipsis—the pressure unto death and the agony under which you live—and I know thy ptocheia—thy destruction and thy absolute want and need.

-In all of this there is a parenthetical statement (but thou art rich) in Revelation 2:9. It is though as if the Lord bends over them and whispers to them the great truth.

- Smyrna counts you poor.
- The blasphemy of the Jews has defiled you.
- The persecution of the pagans has robbed you.
- I know the pain of poverty.
- I know the plight of a pauper.

-But:

You have not lost anything.

You have not forfeited the riches of spiritual wealth.

-When we look to the principles of the Scripture there are things that come to

light:

True wealth is the wealth that never tarnishes, never decays, and never fades.  
The true fulness of a man's life is determined by his fellowship with God.  
True wealth is the enrichment of character not the possession of gold.

### **3. The Blasphemy They Faced**

-The Lord says lastly, "I know the blasphemy that you face." The word used here in this context is BLASPHEMIA. This word is usually associated with blasphemy against God. But in this setting it refers to the slander that the "synagogue of Satan" stirs against the Church.

-The Emperor Nero had an actor, Aliturus, whom he admired very much. He also had another vile friendship with another man named Popaea. Both of these men were Jews. They used their contact with the Emperor to feed the slander against the early church. It was because they were convicted of their sins that they fought the early church so vigorously. The result was the first stages of Christian persecution.

-But the Lord knew of the plight of the saints at Smyrna and he urged them to be faithful unto death and he would give them a crown. Not only did He know about the problems they faced, He was associated with them in the sufferings.

-It was in the synagogue that He had been forced to endure the mockery of supposed religion.

### **III. THE GREATEST COST**

-One of these great days, we will be made aware of the incredible privilege that came with the cost that many will pay in their devotion to God on this earth.

#### **A. The Revival in Columbia**

Someone has got to be there to get it started. Someone has to be there when there is nothing. It remained nothing for the Veneer Larson's until the act of child birth took his wife. Abigail died in the birth process. Now Columbia would get a

glimpse of how the missionary would handle death and the grief surrounding the occasion. Bro. Larson wrapped in nothing but grace built that crude wooden casket and laid his bride to rest. He lovingly dug the grave where he placed the box. He sang whatever song was sung and preached whatever funeral message was preached.

Then he took his remaining children by the hand and led them back to the home except this time it would be without a wife and mother. He read the letters from his family in North America as he rocked that small infant and attempted to keep it quiet. He consoled the children the best that he knew how. The letters from North America all said, "Come Home!!!" But Bro. Larson looked into tomorrow and saw Columbia without God. He could not and would not take Columbia's only hope back to Canada and close the door for revival forever.

The funeral had a purpose beyond the burial of beloved Abigail. For it was on that day that the Colombians saw the strength and courage. It was the seed that grew so fast that it startled even the observers. Their tomorrows were filled with revival and lost souls being captured.

It was the beginning of the revival that would bring the Drosts, the Thompsons, and the Marleys. With persecution unparalleled but conversions unprecedented, Satan's kingdom began to crumble.

What of Bill Drost and the strange request that was made of him one night after service in Columbia? A young Columbian convert walked up to Bro. Drost, "Please sir, I would like to ride your horse home and wear your hat too!" It was an unusual request but he agreed. It was only when Bro. Drost turned the last curve in the road and saw the riderless horse and the mutilated body of his young friend that he understood the price that had been paid for revival in his homeland. The young man had overheard a plot to rid Columbia of Bill Drost. He had declared, "No, No!!" "I will be the substitute."

-I have often wondered what the kingdom of God would be like if there were no price tags. But there will always be price tags on spiritual accomplishments.

John 12:24 -- "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit."

-When men are fighting for freedom, as our American soldiers have fought for in the past, there are images, monuments, and concepts that associate with

freedom. The things that they go into danger for, the freedom they are willing to die for is something that they have seen.

-Such is not the case for the man who gives his life for the Kingdom. No martyr ever saw Heaven. No martyr could ever really quite grasp what he was dying for. Sure he was willing to die for a God who had delivered him from his own sin. But there was nothing physical he could see that he was dying for. That is what makes the martyr all the more powerful in his fatal embrace of the Kingdom of God.

-To die for the Kingdom. To fall to the ground and die. Yet in dying it brings forth much fruit.

2 Corinthians 6:10 – “. . . as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.”

-It is at that point that the cost becomes a privilege.

### **B. A Crown Given to the Faithful**

-The gracious promise that comes to the church at Smyrna. Be faithful unto death and I will give you a crown.

-The crown is more than just a crown of royalty. It is a crown of victory. But it is even more than that. It is a crown of added wealth. But it is even more. It is the crown of life.

-Life which reigns because it has won and reigns in the possession of greatness gained through a walk and battle of righteousness. This pressure of tribulation is not accidental nor capricious. Out of tribulation we shall have triumph. Out of darkness comes the light. That is the whole philosophy of suffering. This is the precept gained from pressure. This is the mark of the church at Smyrna.

## **IV. CONCLUSION – THE MARTYR’S REWARD**

From November of 1998 to January of 2001 the number of licensed ministers 28 years old and younger in the UPCI declined by 16%. For the same period of time, the decline in the number of ministers 36 years of age and

younger is 7 ½ %. It is not until we get to ministers in their late 30's and into their 40's that we find an increase in the number of ministers for that November 1998 to January 2001 time period (Pentecostal Herald, July 2001).

There is no shortage of young people in the United Pentecostal Church. Every Youth Congress brings successive record crowds. Registration at district youth functions finds continued growth. The young men and women of the United Pentecostal Church have great opportunities before them. The educational and professional opportunities abound for our youth today.

But in the pursuit of the “good life” we may have turned a deaf ear to the call of God in our life. Like Martha we have found that we are encumbered by many things.

-What are you going to do with your life? That is the greatest question.

Crowns are reserved for God’s faithful servants. One missionary Adoniram Judson, a missionary to Burma found faithfulness to be a premium during his tenure there. He was arrested and falsely accused of being an enemy agent. Imprisoned in a tiny cell, he was forced to stand so others could lie down and sleep. The sun was unbearably hot and since they were not allowed to bathe, the stench was horrible. One day the officials decided prison was not enough punishment for this infidel, so they hoisted Judson into the air by his thumbs—pain filled every fiber of his body. When he was returned to his cell, his precious wife, Anne, would creep in after dark and whisper to him, “Hang on, Adoniram, God will give us the victory.”

Week after torturous week, Anne would come by every night to encourage him with the same words, “Hang on, Adoniram, God will give us the victory.” One night she didn’t come, and another night passed without a sign of her returning. Weeks went by and his loneliness grew to an unbearable level. No one told him that Anne was dying.

Months later, he was released, a man whose body was so broken it was a miracle he could walk. He began his search for his beloved wife, returning to the place where they used to live. As he limped toward his home, he saw a child sitting in the dirt, a little girl so covered with filth that he failed to recognize her as his own daughter. He picked her up and staggered into the tent, his eyes squinting into the darkness. It was then that he saw her, a bundle of bones and rags lying on a cot, so weak and frail that she looked like a skeleton. It was his Anne, her beautiful hair had fallen out and her bright blue eyes staring blankly at



nothing. Hugging his daughter to his chest, he knelt down and wept, calling her name over and over. "Anne, Anne, Anne, O my darling Anne."

His hot tears fell on her face and slowly her eyes began to move with recognition. She struggled to speak and her last words were, "Hang on, Adoniram, God will give us the victory."

That day Adoniram Judson lost his sweetheart, but not his faith. He lost his loved one, but not his courage. He began to preach again, and soon was building churches. When he died, he left scores of churches and hundreds of converts in a Muslim nation.

-When the last bit of life is squeezed out of me, I want to have embraced God with my life and with my worship. . . . .