

Series: Letters from Jesus to Eight Churches**Sermon: *To Smyrna: A Dangerous Place to be a Christian*****Scripture: Revelation 2:8-11****Speaker: Phil Thengvall**

Today we look at the second of eight letters from Jesus, seven of which are found in the 2nd and 3rd chapters of Revelation. I would suggest you pick up a copy of last weeks sermon if you were not here, so you can get Pastor Mike's excellent introduction to this important series of messages.

Welcome to Smyrna - A Dangerous Place to be a Christian!

Located a little over 30 miles north of Ephesus, the city of Smyrna, was on the Aegean coast of modern Turkey. Smyrna, known today as Izmir, is Turkey's third largest city. The following slides show some of the ancient ruins as well as the modern-day structures of Izmir.

In the New Testament period this city had a population of more than 100,000 people. A fine road gave it access to the interior, and its excellent natural harbor provided for a flourishing export trade. It was one of the most prosperous cities in Asia Minor.

We do not know when the church at Smyrna began, since it is not mentioned in the book of Acts or in the NT letters. An early tradition states that the Apostle Paul visited the church on his third missionary journey.

The church in Smyrna was a suffering church, and this letter from Christ addresses their past, present, and future afflictions, and encourages them to not be afraid, but to be faithful.

Persecution: a reality for the true church

Pastor Charles Swindoll said, "There are two universal languages, music and suffering. One need not understand the words to understand either of these languages."

According to the New Testament, suffering is the mark of every true Christian and every Christian church. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said,

"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."

How did the prophets fare? Was it risky to be a prophet of God?

The Example of the Prophets

Jeremiah was scourged and placed in a dungeon – Jer. 20:2

Zechariah was stoned to death in the temple courtyard – 2 Chron. 24:21

Isaiah was sawn in two by Manasseh – according to Jewish tradition

Summary statements of OT believers found in Hebrews 11:35ff

"Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground."

In the early days of the church the apostles filled a similar role to that of the prophets, what was it like for them? Was being an apostle a dangerous calling?

The Testimony of the Apostles

After Paul met Christ on the road to Damascus, Ananias was told this about Paul,

"This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." Acts 9:15,16

From his 2nd letter to the church at Corinth we have this description of what Paul had to suffer for Jesus' name in compared to other so-called messengers of Jesus:

“I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. ²⁷I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.”

The Expectations of Jesus

In addition to what Jesus said in Matthew 5, on the night of his betrayal and arrest he shared these prophetic remarks with his disciples:

“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: ‘No servant is greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me.” John 15:18-21

What the prophets experienced, what the apostles endured, and what Jesus warned about, reinforces “the call to suffering” every Christian is given. Suffering is still the hallmark of the church today, as it was in the first century AD. Was it more risky to be a Christian in AD 75? To my surprise, records show that there were more Christians martyred in the 20th century, than in the first century; In fact the number of martyrs in the 20th century exceeds all those martyred in the previous 19 centuries. Even though this letter was written to a persecuted, suffering, 1st century church these words of Christ are applicable to us today as well.

Some of you are in a dangerous place this morning, because being a Christian in your workplace is a liability. Or you are facing a possible lay off notice, or are presently unemployed. Or may be a medical or financial crisis that has you laying awake at night. Or maybe you need to say “No” to someone or something, but struggle with the courage to do so, fearing the ridicule and teasing that will come your way. You will be able to relate to this letter from Jesus, written to the suffering Christians in Smyrna, 2000 years ago. Let’s look first at...

Why did Christians suffer in Smyrna?

- **Smyrna’s political alliance with Rome** - Although specific causes for the persecution are not given, we can speculate with some certainty. Once it came under Roman rule the city was quick to adopt Roman social and religious ways. In 195 BC a temple was built to the Dea Roma, a goddess that personified Rome, and Smyrna was granted the privilege of constructing the only temple to Emperor Tiberius. This gave the cult of emperor worship a strong foothold in Smyrna. At least once a year Christians were asked to burn incense to Caesar and call him Lord, and their refusal to conform was interpreted by others as a lack of patriotism and an act of treason. In addition to emperor worship Smyrna was also a mythological worship center, with temples to many Greek gods and goddesses, including Apollo, Aphrodite, and Zeus.
- **Opposition from Jews** – there was also a large community of Jews within the city that was antagonistic to the Christian faith, and hostile toward individual Christians. Smyrna was not a safe place live if you were a Christian. You were a marked person, every move was noticed, and anything suspicious was quickly reported. Those reported were arrested, and many ended up dying for their faith in the city of Smyrna.

Turn with me now to the letter to the Angel of the church of Smyrna, Rev. 2:8-11.

What did Christians suffer in Smyrna?

- **Poverty** – “I know... your poverty” – it is likely many of these Christians were slaves to wealthy citizens, and as such lived below the poverty level. They may have suffered the looting and confiscation of their property.

If they owned businesses, pagan citizens were apt to boycott them, preferring to purchase goods and services from those of their own kind. The word for poverty used here means “extreme hardship to the point of being beggars”, Abject poverty can be personally degrading and humiliating.

Illus: Even today it may not always pay to be a Christian in business, especially if material gain is your goal. You may have to refuse the “sweetheart deals”; and say no to shady business methods; you will deny yourself the luxury of cutting corners on work to increase profits at the client’s expense; and sometimes doing things the Christ-honoring way, will prove more time consuming, expensive, and even painful. Choosing the path of integrity does not necessarily guarantee success or wealth. Sometimes it means just the opposite. This was the case for Christians in Smyrna. But poverty was not all they endured.

- **Slander – “I know the slander of those who say they are Jews”.** Jews were spreading false rumors about the Christians. Minds were being poisoned. The late Ray Stedman did a good job summarizing what this slander might have been like.

“Because the Christians talked about eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ, *they were accused of being cannibals*. Also, because they refused to visit the pagan temples, or to acknowledge the gods of the pagans, *they were called atheists*. Christians talked often about being members one of another and of loving one another, and so *they were accused of having sexual orgies*. Lies were spread about them that when they met together it was to indulge in licentious and lascivious practices. Because they refused to acknowledge Caesar as Lord, *they were accused of being traitors*. It is hard to bear up under slander.”

Stedman went on to say that he recalled watching an interview with Dr. Everett Koop, the former Surgeon General of the United States, and also an interview with Judge Robert Bork who in 1987 was denied a seat on the Supreme Court. Both of these men testified to the difficulty and pain they suffered from the lies and slander that were told about them. They were vilified in the public press. They were accused of doing things they had not done, and this was hard for them to bear. In addition to slander, some were being placed in prison.

- **Prison – “the devil will put some of you in prison.”** In his commentary on Revelation, William Barclay said, “In those days a Christian was a person who lived with a sword poised over his or her head.” The early apostles, including Peter and Paul, had seen the inside of many prisons, as had OT saints, like Joseph and Daniel. But because of their attitude the cells they inhabited were turned into sanctuaries by their praises and prayers.

Finally, the Christians at Smyrna were facing possible martyrdom.

- **Death – “Be faithful, even to death.”** Death, the final threat, was the ultimate suffering they faced. One of the best known Christian martyrs of all ages was a native of Smyrna. Polycarp, a devoted Christian, served as the Bishop of the church of Smyrna, and may have been consecrated by the apostle John himself. He would have been alive when the letter of Revelation was written. In a letter from the church at Smyrna to the churches in the Christian world, it is said that Jews joined with pagans in requesting that Polycarp should be cast to the lions or burned alive. The account follows:

"It was the time of the public games; the city was crowded; and the crowds were excited. Suddenly the shout went up: 'Away with the atheists; let Polycarp be searched for.' No doubt Polycarp could have escaped; but already he had had a dream vision in which he saw the pillow under his head burning with fire, and he had awakened to tell his disciples: 'I must be burnt alive.'

"His whereabouts was betrayed by a slave who collapsed under torture. They came to arrest him Not even the police captain wished to see Polycarp die. On the brief journey to the city, he pled with the old man: 'What harm is it to say, "Caesar is Lord" and to offer sacrifice and be saved?' But Polycarp was adamant that for him only Jesus Christ was Lord.

"When he entered the arena ... [the] proconsul gave him the choice of cursing the name of Christ and making sacrifice to Caesar or death. 'Eighty and six years have I served Him,' said Polycarp, 'and He has done me no

wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?' The proconsul threatened him with burning, and Polycarp replied:

'You threaten me with the fire that burns for a time, and is quickly quenched, for you do not know the fire that awaits the wicked in the judgment to come and in everlasting punishment. Why are you waiting? Come, do what you will.'

"So the crowds came flocking with embers from the workshops and from the baths, and the Jews, even although they were breaking the Sabbath law by carrying such burdens, were foremost in bringing wood for the fire. They were going to bind him to the stake. 'Leave me as I am,' He said, 'for He who gives me power to endure the fire, will grant me to remain in the flames unmoved even without the security you will give by the nails.' So they left him loosely bound in the flames" (William Barclay, The Revelation of John, vol. 1 [Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976], pp. 76- 77).

Can you relate to what these early Christians experienced? Can you relate to what our brothers and sisters in Christ are experiencing today in Sudan, in China, and in Pakistan? It's hard to imagine such conditions, such hatred of Christians. Is persecution the only form which suffering takes for a Christian? Author and pastor, John Piper, says it is not. In his book Desiring God, there is a chapter entitled "Suffering", and it alone is worth the price of the book. He believes that although much of the suffering experienced by Christians comes as a result of choosing to be openly Christian in risky situations, all situations are risky, in one way or another. If I choose to be a follower of Christ, in the way he directs, I choose all that path includes under His sovereign providence. All suffering which comes in the path of obedience is suffering with and for Christ – whether it is due to cancer or conflict, enemies or enemies. Our path, and our suffering, is "chosen" – that is we choose to take the path of obedience where the suffering occurs, and we do not murmur or complain against God.

We may ask as Paul did, that the suffering be removed; but if it is not God's will to do so, we embrace it as part of the cost of discipleship, in the chosen path of obedience on the way to heaven.

All incidents of suffering on this path of obedience, whether persecution, sickness, or accident, have one thing in common: they all make us afraid, and threaten our faith in the goodness of God, and tempt us to walk away from the path of Christian obedience. A dear Christian friend of mine who recently suffered a great loss said "I don't question the existence of God, but I do wonder about his character." Piper says in summary, "Therefore, every triumph of faith and all perseverance in obedience are testimonies to the goodness of God and the preciousness of Christ – whether the enemy is sickness, Satan, sin, or sabotage." It is to the character and preciousness of Christ we now turn our attention.

What does Christ bring to Suffering Christians?

- **His Sovereignty – "the First and the Last"**. Christ brings to those who suffer for his name his eternity; his being both the beginning and the end, the one who is from everlasting to everlasting. In the midst of the change going on in their lives he is unchanging. He is the same, yesterday, today, and forever. He is the place of security for believers. All of the past, the present, and the future, are under the control of our Lord Jesus Christ. Whatever comes into our lives is first sifted through his hands of love. He is sovereign, he is in control.

Illus: The site of the former Alfred P. Murrah federal building in OKC is occupied today by a large memorial. This memorial includes a reflecting pool flanked by two large 'doorways', one inscribed with the time 9:01, the opposite with 9:03, the pool between representing the moment of the blast. Think of this reflecting pool as your life, or as history. Jesus knows what is between our birth and death, but even more he encompasses all time and eternity when he says "I am the First and the Last" nothing is outside the bookends, the "doorways" of his care.

- **His empathy, "who died and came to life"**. These Christians were told that death was in the picture for some of them. Christ asks them to be faithful, even unto death. Who better understands what is involved

in facing death than one who has faced it, even experienced it? Who better understands suffering than one who suffered himself?

We are told in Hebrews 2, “For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God.... Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”

When we suffer we know He has been there. He understands. He is empathetic. He will faithfully and mercifully be with us in our suffering.

From Stedman, “I read once about a Christian who was going through a time of great misunderstanding and attack, and he could not do much to defend himself. One day a friend of his came up and took him by the hand and told him how much he sympathized with him for what he was going through. But, looking him in the eye, he said, “Remember, they have not spit in your face yet.” It was a reference, of course, to Jesus. They did spit in his face. They smote him. They plucked the hair from his beard. They beat him on the back with rods. They lied about him. So Christians who endure mistreatment and misjudgment must remember that the Lord knows what it is like.” Jesus is a fellow sufferer. He brings his empathy to us when we suffer.

- **His Omniscience, “I know your afflictions....”** The Greek word for “know” means “to know by experience” not “to know by observation”. We are told in Hebrews that “We do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tested in every way we have” so he can help us. The fact that Christ knows what his children are experiencing is a great source of comfort. His knowledge is not a distant acquaintance with our circumstance, but a close, personal understanding of us as individuals. He knows how we feel, what we fear, what we tell no one else, even the things we are afraid to admit to ourselves.

Illus: If you have been attending First Free for a while you may know that I work with those who are grieving because a family member or close friend has died. I not only bring to this situation some clinical training in bereavement care, but a personal knowledge of grief. My first wife died of cancer, so I know by experience what it is to lose a loved one. Many of you do too. You also know how that enables you to walk alongside others in a similar situation. There is no trial, no affliction, no persecution that Jesus does not know through experience.

- **His Perspective, “I know...your poverty, yet you are rich.”** Jesus does not have the same set of values as does the world. In the world’s eyes, the impoverished Christians at Smyrna were total losers, fools, and idiots. Jesus looks not only on the material possessions a person has, but on the spiritual condition of their heart. He reminds us that those who are poor in what the world has, can be rich toward God, rich in faith, rich in good deeds, and can have treasures stored up in heaven. The apostle Peter wrote these encouraging words to his fellow Christians who were undergoing extreme poverty and persecution,

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.”

The apostle Paul shared Christ’s perspective on suffering. He said that he and his co-workers were “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.”

Christ encouraged the suffering Christians in Smyrna to see their eternal riches, that they were heirs of God, joint-heirs with him. Jesus also brings to those who suffer his mercy.

- **His mercy, “you will suffer for ten days”.** Even in times of extreme difficulty, God’s mercy can be seen in that the suffering has an end point. We don’t know if this was a literal ten-day period or not. But, it does tell us that it would be brief, and it would be limited to a time predetermined by the Sovereign

Lord of Eternity. God had given Satan permission to put *some* of them in prison, not *all* of them. A limit is set as to the number of Christians involved, and to the duration of this ordeal.

No suffering can surround any Christian that will be beyond what they can endure, because the nature, time, and frequency are all within God's control.

This is promised in 1 Corinthians 10:13, (from *The Message*) "No test or temptation that comes your way is beyond the course of what others have had to face. All you need to remember is that God will never let you down; he'll never let you be pushed past your limit; he'll always be there to help you come through it."

Those who remember that God is on the throne, and is in control of human affairs, can remain calm in the middle of the storms, the evils, the sorrows of the world. As he did in the life of Job, or Jeremiah, God said to the Devil in Smyrna, "This far and no farther!" We can receive tremendous comfort from the recognition that the One who loves us and is committed to us is in control of our circumstances. We usually see the wisdom of God's timing in hindsight.

Illus: Our friend Anita Bengtson had one prayer the final six weeks of her suffering with pancreatic cancer, "Please God, take me to heaven, I am ready to be with you." We wondered why she lingered, but when she died the day after her youngest son's birthday, the final family birthday of the calendar year, it seemed to make perfect sense. We can trust God's timing, his clock is mercy-driven. We can also trust His purposes in our suffering.

- **His Providential Care, "in prison to test you"**. The suffering they would undergo was a test. Suffering always has that quality about it: it reveals something about an individual that may not otherwise be seen. What God wants others to see in us is His character. When the trial and testing comes, it is not because God is asleep at the wheel; he has a good purpose for it.

As James said, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." (1:3-4)

What Satan means for our harm, God turns into our good, whether in this life or the next. The Christians in Smyrna were tested, not so God could see what they could endure, since God already knew their hearts. The test was given so they could see what God had already done, to see how much they had grown, to show them how much they had truly learned to rely on the grace and strength of God. They would see that "His grace was sufficient" for them, as it had been for Paul.

Satan tempts us in order to destroy; our Father in Heaven tests us in order to refine.

John Stott said, "We need then to look *beyond the trial to the purpose, beyond the pain of the chastening to its profit.*" Then we can say what Joseph said to his brothers, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." (Gen. 50:20)

- **His Generosity, "I will give you the crown of life"**. Christ promised to give a rich reward to the Christians at Smyrna, and to all who are faithful through times of suffering. He said, "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life, . . . He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death." (vs. 10, 11) Smyrna was famous for its arena and its Olympic type games, so they would not have had difficulty imagining the Christian life as a race, a contest, in which the victor would receive a wreath or garland. The race would be fast-paced, hard-going, involving sweat and pain. But at the end of the race would stand Christ the supreme victor, who is the first and the last; and in his hand the crown of life which every conqueror would receive. This crown is not eternal life, but the fullness of that life. In Smyrna each year a few of the administrators, council members, rulers, and priests received a crown of leaves for their faithfulness to their civic and religious duties. In the words of Paul, "They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever." Nothing the world gives to honor its heroes, whether athletic, civic, or military, compares to what Christ promises to his faithful children. "I will give you the crown of Life."

What does Christ say to Christians in 2006? Suffering is the hallmark of the authentic church, and the faithful Christian. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor who was hanged by direct order of Himmler in the Flossenburg concentration camp in Germany on April 9, 1945, just days before the camp was liberated, wrote, “Suffering then is the badge of the true Christian. The disciple is not above his master.... Luther reckoned suffering among the marks of the true church.... Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ, and it is therefore not at all surprising that Christians should be called upon to suffer...” (*The Cost of Discipleship*).

Down through the centuries this has proved to be true, and today Christians are suffering for their faith in Sudan, Myanmar, China, Pakistan, and other places where it is dangerous to be a Christian. What does Christ say to them, and to us today? He has not changed his message; it is the same as that which he gave to the believers in Smyrna.

➤ **“Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer.”** This is literally “Stop being afraid”. Christ, who knew there was fear in their hearts as they received this letter, spoke to their fear with words of peace and assurance. Of all the commands of Scripture, this is the one found most often. The same Christ who spoke this 2000 years ago, speaks it today. “Stop being afraid! You can count on my purpose, my empathy, my knowledge, my perspective, my mercy, my care, and my generosity. As I was with your brothers and sisters in Smyrna, I will be with you.”

Can you stop being afraid about the upcoming lay off at work, the test results from the Dr., the mounting bills and diminishing income, the courage to take a “risky” stand as you walk in the path obedience to Jesus? You can, with his help. Christ brings himself to your need, you can trust him.

➤ **“Be faithful, even to the point of death”** Fear can lead to faith. David said, “When I am afraid, I will trust (put my faith) in you. In God I trust, I will not be afraid. What can mortal man do to me?” (Psa. 56:3,4) To the synagogue official who heard his daughter had died before Jesus could come to heal her, Jesus said, “Do not be afraid any longer, only believe.” (Mark 5:36) It is from faith that faithfulness springs. If we have faith in Christ, we will remain faithful, even unto death. Is Christ worthy of our trust when we suffer? The answer is a resounding “Yes!” He is worthy of our implicit trust and faith because of who he is and what he is. His purpose, empathy, knowledge, perspective, mercy, care, and generosity prove he is worthy of all our faith and trust.

How will you step out in faith and remain faithful this week? With Christ’s help you can turn your worry into a prayer and exercise faith rather than give in to fear. Meditating on Psalm 23 is a wonderful way to replace worry with faith. “The Lord is my shepherd; he supplies all my needs....”

We also know the best is yet to come. It has not yet been revealed what the Father will give to those who remain faithful. As God raised Jesus from the grave, so we have a living hope that he will raise us from the grave to live eternally with Him. The suffering that Paul chose, that the prophets chose, that Jesus chose, that the Christians in Smyrna chose would have been utterly foolish and pitiable if there were no resurrection into the joyful and blessed presence of Christ. But since there is, we must remain faithful, as they did, even to the point of death.