

Letters from God
Be Faithful until Death
Revelation 2:8-11

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Introduction to the Text: We are in the second week of a series we are calling, “Letters from God.” Revelation 2-3 contains 7 letters written to 7 historical churches of the first century world. More than just ancient letters, these letters are absolutely filled with practical themes for us to consider today. Last week, we considered the first letter and underscored the theme that we should be focused on “Keeping Jesus First.” He is to be our first love. When we discover that Jesus is not our first love, we must immediately seek to return Him as our first love.

Today, we encounter the letter to the church at Smyrna. We will say some specific things about this city in a little bit, but suffice to say, that alongside Ephesus, this is an important city in the first century world. One of the interesting things about this letter is that Jesus has no word of condemnation for this church. Nothing like last week, when we read about the Church at Ephesus, “But I have this against you...” To Smyrna, the challenge is one of “keep on keeping on” or continue to do what you are already doing. It is a message to “Be faithful until death.”

Text: ⁸ "To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

"The First and the Last, the One who was dead and came to life, says: ⁹ I know your tribulation and 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. ¹⁰ Don't be afraid of what you are about to suffer. Look, the Devil is about to throw some of you into prison to test you, and you will have tribulation for 10 days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

¹¹ "Anyone who has an ear should listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. The victor will never be harmed by the second death.

Introduction: One of the basic rules of Biblical interpretation is to understand what the text meant to the original recipient. Only when we have understood the original message to the original audience can we struggle with the application for our lives today. For our context, in Lafayette, LA, this is not an easy task, because the historical situation of the Church in Smyrna is so drastically different from our situation. The circumstance in Smyrna that prompts this message is one of real persecution—persecution that potentially leads to death. By the way, we should be mindful today that there are still many who face persecution that potentially leads to death. Just this week, I received two different e-mail pieces detailing accounts of persecution toward Christians in other countries.

Our suffering may be more emotional—an appeal to be silent about our claims about Christ. Regardless, the letter to the Church at Smyrna reminds us no matter our suffering we are to “Be faithful until death.” What are the keys to “being faithful until death?”

Assume that we will be called to suffer.

As Christians we ought to live with some expectation of suffering. After all, we are, as Christians, a peculiar people. We are to be set apart. We are going to come into some degree of conflict with the establishment of the culture, and that is going to on occasion cause suffering.

Background into the Suffering of Smyrna

- Smyrna was a center in the first century world for the emperor cult. In 23 A.D. a temple was built to honor the emperor Tiberius. In the reign of Domitian (81-96) it is believed that all citizens had a compulsory mandate to proclaim “Caesar is Lord.”
- Because of Jewish resistance to Christianity there was likely a financial suffering due to be locked out of the trade guilds.
- The text is specific that this suffering even lead to imprisonment.

Basis of all Suffering

Suffering is the logical result of anyone who will be committed to Christ.

- Matthew 5:11-12 “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you...”
- 2 Timothy 3:12 “Indeed all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

The Being Behind All Suffering: The Devil

- 2 Peter 5:8 Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeding someone to devour.

Certainly one of the strategies of Satan is to destroy the Church. The invitation to suffer is not a prominent church growth strategy. Somebody might say, “Come join our church—we have an awesome pastor (Just joking!), or we have a great Children’s program. We have great fellowship.” On and on we could go. But, you never hear someone say, “Come join us—we are going to encounter suffering.

Be Assured of God’s Character in the Face of Suffering.

Just as we ought to assume some degree of suffering, we can also be assured of God’s character in the face of this suffering. He does not always choose to remove us from the suffering, but He always walks with us through the suffering.

- (1) He is eternal. “the first and the last”
- (2) He is victorious. “who was dead, and has come to life”
- (3) He is omniscient. “I know”
- (4) He is faithful. “but you are rich”
- (5) He is purposeful. “to test you”
- (6) He is sovereign. “you will have tribulation for ten days.
- (7) He is generous. “I will give you the crown of life.”

Apply God's Strategy for Victory.

Rev. 12:11¹⁰ Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say:

The salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God
and the authority of His Messiah have now come,
because the accuser of our brothers has been thrown out:
the one who accuses them before our God day and night.

¹¹ They conquered him by the blood of the Lamb
and by the word of their testimony,
for they did not love their lives in the face of death.

¹² Therefore rejoice, O heavens, and you who dwell in them!
Woe to the earth and the sea,
for the Devil has come down to you with great fury,
because he knows he has a short time.

- Look to Jesus.

- Look around at what God is doing.

- Look beyond the temporary.

One of Smyrna's most famous citizens who was probably born at the time of the writing of this letter was Polycarp. He became Bishop of Smyrna and is believed to have been a disciple of John—the author of Revelation. He was arrested for not proclaiming Caesar as Lord. As he was led into the arena of his martyrdom, witnesses testify that they heard a voice saying "Be strong, and show yourself a man, O Polycarp!" Again, no one saw one who spoke these words. It is as though the words came down from Heaven.

At the urging of the authorities to declare Caesar as Lord, Polycarp declared, "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour? And when the proconsul yet again pressed him, and said, Swear by the fortune of Cæsar, he answered,

Since you are vainly urgent that, as you say, I should swear by the fortune of Cæsar, and pretend not to know who and what I am, hear me declare with boldness, I am a Christian. And if you wish to learn what the doctrines of Christianity are, appoint me a day, and you shall hear them.

The proconsul then said to him, I have wild beasts at hand; to these will I cast you, unless you repent.

But he answered, Call them then, for we are not accustomed to repent of what is good in order to adopt that which is evil; and it is well for me to be changed from what is evil to what is righteous.

But again the proconsul said to him, I will cause you to be consumed by fire, seeing you despise the wild beasts, if you will not repent.

But Polycarp said, You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour, and after a little is extinguished, but are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. But why do you tarry? Bring forth what you will.

Polycarp's last words were that of his prayer, "O Father, I thank you, that you have called me to this day and hour and have counted me worthy to receive my place among the number of the holy matrys.

In some respects, when we think about suffering, things may be worse than what they seem. On the other hand, things may be better than what they seem because after all God Himself knows and He goes before us. (This phrasing from the title of a sermon by Pastor John Piper.)

(This account is taken from various online sources which translate traditional documents. This is from a letter to Smyrna detailing Polycarp's martyrdom.)