

CHRIST Speaks to Churches
Letters to the Seven Churches of Revelation 1-3

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CHAPTER THREE
CHRIST SPEAKS TO SMYRNA

This was a local church which suffered great persecution. It also represents in the prophetic picture that period of the Church's history when during the early centuries, particularly the second and third, there was wave after wave of persecution. Some Christians may not realize it, but in the last generation or two in our day some of the worst persecutions against the Church of JESUS CHRIST have been suffered in various lands. The end is not yet, and we are reminded that they who live Godly in CHRIST JESUS will suffer persecution. The principles laid down here are guides for us today, showing what the attitude of the Christian should be when persecution comes.

"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" (Revelation 2:8-11).

The Lord JESUS introduces Himself as **"the First and the Last."** This is both revealing and comforting to a church suffering opposition, or to a Christian under severe trial. When all the persecutors are gone, the One who is the First and the Last will still be with us. Moreover, the persecutors will have to stand before Him and answer for their evil deeds.

There is a phase of persecution today that should never be. It is a persecution of Christians by Christians in which the most shameful kind of character assassination often takes place. Today is a day of easy, widespread communication so that the opportunities to smear a man's character and to spread that smear far and wide is simple compared to what it was some years ago.

Often the only reason for such attacks by one Christian against another can be traced to inadequate knowledge. One believer does not understand what work another is seeking to do or clearly know what principles he is following. It may even be that the critical party does not approve of the places to which the other goes, or the kind of people to whom he preaches. We seemingly have forgotten that GOD's people are His servants and they must answer as individuals to Him. We have no right to malign or to molest another person's servant. We, too, must give an account for things we do with regard to GOD's children. All of this will come out at the Judgment Seat of CHRIST as far as Christians are concerned.

Our Lord is also described as the One who was dead and is alive. He too was persecuted, even unto death, but He arose again from the grave. He has unlimited authority to deal with the persecutors and to vindicate the persecuted. He suffered a horrible death, upon the cross where he assumed our guilt. But though He died, He also rose again, which brings great assurance for all who are persecuted. Because He lives His people will live also. We may lose our physical lives, we may lose all our property, everything we have in this world, but we cannot lose Him. Nothing can separate us from the love of GOD which is in CHRIST JESUS, our Lord.

There is no condemnation listed against this church. This in itself is commendation without need of elaboration on the subject. GOD's silence or seeming silence, if we suffer long, does not mean that He is not concerned. It may be the evidence of His approval, and we by faith accept it as such.

If it is necessary for Him to make much over us, pat us on the back, carry us along, and feed us some soothing potion all the time, it could be a sign that we are not living under persecution in the way He wants us to live.

Three Things

There are three things in this section that CHRIST says He knows. He is the All-Knowing One, who sees the end from the beginning. Nothing ever escapes Him. He says here in effect: "I know your tribulation; I know your poverty; and I know the blasphemy of certain ones who claim to be something they are not."

The word translated "**tribulation**" in this passage fits the description of some of the persecution we see in our day under godless, atheistic governments. Men have been tortured to death in concentration camps by all kinds of means and methods - the most horrible that could possibly be thought up. The word for tribulation is a strong one, speaking of great pressure rather than small tests of faith. Possibly a good illustration of the word would be found in the old flour mills which used stones to grind the grain until it is crushed very fine. Such is the kind of persecution spoken of here.

JESUS was crushed like that. He said "**But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people** (Psalm 22:6); in essence, "I am not a man, I am like a worm that has been crushed."

Most of us have never suffered to this degree. And we may never do so. However, if times continue as they are, this could possibly be the lot of many of us, unless our Saviour comes and takes His Church home to be with Himself.

Without a doubt, the whole world will see things it has never seen before in the realm of persecution and hatred as the groundwork for the Antichrist and his evil reign is laid.

We have a large number of forerunners of the Antichrist today, men who, though not the actual person himself, have many of his characteristics, particularly their hatred against the Christian and CHRIST. The Lord also says here, "**I know thy... poverty.**"

The word literally means "*beggary*." They had suffered the loss of all things. This is the same word that describes our Saviour who was rich and became poor, according to II Corinthians 8:9. Just how poor did He become? He left the glories of heaven with its myriads of angels serving Him and came to earth where He had little or nothing. He has shared our poverty in order that through His wealth we might be made rich. This was His message to Smyrna, and it is the same to us.

In the third place, He knew those who were of the synagogue of Satan, who claimed to be Jews but were not. And there are many like them today. Some claim to be the one hundred and forty-four thousand. Others claim that their church organization is the only true church. Unless a person joins their particular group he cannot be saved. GOD classifies all such as the "**synagogue of Satan**." That is not a pleasing classification to make, but it is one GOD has made, not us.

A Word of Comfort

Now a word of comfort is given. Those at Smyrna were told to "**fear none of those things**" which they would suffer. There are believers who suffer just because they are Christians and not because they have done anything wrong. This, of course, is proof of the righteous quality of their character.

Here again we must be on our guard. In most unexpected ways our enemy can trip us up. To feel sorry for ourselves could be a temptation when persecuted. We might well ask ourselves if we are being built up in the Word today so that if suffering for the faith should come our way we would be able to stand up under it, rejoice in it, and not be filled with self-pity.

Take our Saviour for an example. He suffered without opening His mouth in complaint or even to defend Himself. He was led as a sheep to the slaughter and as a lamb, dumb before its shearers, He opened not His mouth. He did not seek to vindicate Himself. There are godly men today who have been maligned and attacked but have refused to vindicate themselves, leaving it to GOD to do it for them.

Moses was a meek man, possibly the meekest who ever lived, according to the Scriptures, but he suffered. One reason he is called meek is that he did not defend himself when severely criticized. It is true that toward the end of his life he spoke some words in a fit of anger that brought discipline upon him. He was not permitted to enter the Promised Land. And the reason GOD made such an example in Moses' case was due to his position. The main point, however, is that Moses suffered criticism and persecution from men, particularly from his own nation and family, and yet he did not seek to vindicate himself. He let GOD take care of that.

Attitude in Trials

The admonition GOD gave to the church of Smyrna was, "**Fear none of these things**." He did not promise them relief. In fact, there was the prospect of further persecution ahead of them. This is contrary to what people today think GOD should do. Some of them are saying, "If GOD is a GOD of love why doesn't He stop such persecution?" There is a very good reason why GOD allows it, for out of persecution comes the true person. If we as Christians live godly in CHRIST

JESUS, we will suffer persecution (II Timothy 3:12). Why? In order that we might know CHRIST better and be more like Him.

Job suffered great hardships and persecution at the hands of Satan. But at the end of his afflictions Job was able to say, **"I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes."** And in another place he said, **"When he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold."**

There are other portions of Scripture which tell us what our attitude should be towards trials. Peter wrote, **"Rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy"** (I Peter 4:13). We are not to be despondent under persecution, but to rejoice, because there will be added glory for us in the day when CHRIST appears.

Again Peter tells us: **"If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of GOD resteth upon you; on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified"** (I Peter 4:14). There is no need to feel ashamed but rather to rejoice when faced with such circumstances.

A word of warning follows these admonitions

Peter says, **"But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men's matters. Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify GOD on this behalf."** The day is coming when GOD will glorify His name through us in a way that we have no concept of as yet.

In the last verse of this fourth chapter, Peter writes: **"Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator."**

Our GOD is faithful, and when we are convinced of this we will never question what He permits us to pass through. He is always right; this we must remember and be settled upon. He knows what He is doing and has promised that if we are faithful, He will give us the crown of life. This is not eternal life for we received that the moment we trusted in CHRIST. It is something added to the believer's salvation.

A crown speaks of royalty and of victory. We will be more than conquerors through Him. The one who overcomes shall not be hurt of the second death. What a great assurance this is for the saint, but what a solemn warning and condemnation for one who does not know CHRIST as Saviour.

~ end of chapter 3 ~

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