

AN OVERVIEW OF THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF ASIA

by William McCarrell

Copyright © 1936

by William McCarrell

edited for 3BSB by Baptist Bible Believer in the spirit of the Colportage Ministry of a century ago

~ out-of-print and in the public domain ~

CHAPTER 3

SMYRNA - THE SUFFERING CHURCH

"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)

SUGGESTIVE STUDY OUTLINE

- I. THE COMMAND TO WRITE. Vs. 8
- II. THE CHURCH ADDRESSED. Vs. 8
- III. THE DESCRIPTION OF THE SPEAKER. Vs. 8

- 1. The First and the Last
- 2. Was dead and is alive.

IV. THE COMMENDATION. Vs. 9

- 1. For works.
- 2. For suffering.

V. THE COMFORT FOR SUFFERERS. Vss. 9, 10

- 1. Suffering known to CHRIST
- 2. Burdens known by CHRIST
- 3. Opposition understood by CHRIST
- 4. Works and suffering appreciated by CHRIST
- 5. Works and suffering rewarded by CHRIST

6. Riches assured by CHRIST

VI. THE ENLIGHTENMENT AS TO SUFFERING. Vs. 10

1. Its instigator -- Satan.
2. Its severity (tribulation)
3. Its limitation (ten days)
4. Its purpose
 - a. To try (purify)
 - b. To enrich (crown of life)

VII. THE ENCOURAGEMENT AS TO SUFFERING. Vss. 10, 11

1. It need not be feared
2. It is limited as to time.
3. Triumph brings reward
4. Overcomers safeguarded from second death

VIII. THE APPEAL TO HEAR. Vs. 11

IX. THE EXHORTATION TO OVERCOME. Vs. 11

X. THE REWARD FOR OVERCOMERS. Vss. 9-11

1. Spiritual, eternal, heavenly enrichment. vs. 9
2. A crown of life. Vs. 10
3. Assurance of deliverance from second death. Vs. 11.

SUFFERING FORETOLD

How biblically significant that the second period of church history, pictured by Smyrna, is a suffering period. GOD chastened in order to correct spiritually, edify, and use: "**As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent**" (Revelation 3:19). How sad that though many individual believers during the Smyrna period heeded GOD's plea set forth in the Ephesian letter as to maintaining first-love fellowship with CHRIST; nevertheless the Church collectively did not so act.

The Smyrna Church prophetically pictures a period of unusual suffering. This was fulfilled in the second and third centuries of Church history, now commonly referred to as the martyr period. This period can be understood as an experience permitted by GOD in order to correct weakness mentioned in the letter to Ephesus. Furthermore, GOD often permits His own to suffer in order to purify, edify and use them. It can be understood Satanward as one of his many attempts to defeat CHRIST's work through suffering, persecution and violence. The attitude of mankind is easily understood by remembering that Christians had turned from worldwide idolatrous worship. GOD then, as now, judged mankind's idolatry through epidemics, earthquakes and catastrophes.

Unsaved mankind claimed these happened because Christians did not worship their idols; hence, persecution resulted. Laws against magic were enforced. The unsaved attributed many

miraculous answers to prayer upon the part of Christians to magic. This increased persecution.

COMFORT FOR SUFFERERS

In each letter of Revelation two and three the message is from a resurrected CHRIST to the angel, which means messenger and represents any proclaiming GOD's truth to the Church. The Church name in each letter significantly strengthens the message. "Smyrna" means "myrrh," a fragrant, sacred perfume: "**Take thou also unto thee principal spices, of pure myrrh five hundred shekels, and of sweet cinnamon half so much, even two hundred and fifty shekels, and of sweet calamus two hundred and fifty shekels**" (Exodus 30:23). It was also used for embalming, thus associated with death. It suggests fragrance through suffering -- even death. The description of the speaker strengthens every part of His message. In the Smyrna letter He is "**the first and the last.**"

Creation and redemption begin with JESUS CHRIST. Eternal damnation or salvation, loss or gain, punishment or glory, are contingent upon Him. Life for Him supersedes any earthly interest. Hence, suffering and death fade into insignificance: "**Therefore let no man glory in men. For all things are yours; Whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours; And ye are Christs; and Christ is Gods**" (I Corinthians 3:21-23). He is ever the unchangeable One. He is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8), despite changing experiences caused by suffering, persecution and death. He was dead and is alive. The One Who conquered the climax of all physical suffering -- death -- can understand, sympathize with and deliver those suffering or dying for Him. Because He lives, saved ones shall live despite martyrdom.

The Smyrna Church is commendably reminded that its works, sacrifices and tribulation are known and appreciated by CHRIST who love it and gave Himself for it. He lives at GOD's right hand to enrich and reward. Though poor in material things of time it was rich in spiritual things of eternity, -- in prayer, faith, fellowship, experience, service, fruit and reward. Its treasure was in Heaven. What contrast to the last-days (Laodicean) Church, boasting all things material, but so spiritually impoverished that CHRIST will spue it out of His mouth. A godly missionary remarked that the Church in the United States had left GOD and gone into architecture [***this was in 1936 when this booklet was written***]. Two characteristics of the nineteenth century Church are its material wealth and spiritual weakness.

The **Smyrna** (*suffering*) Church was comforted by assurance that CHRIST understood its opposition which was from within. This subtle, blasphemous opposition, came from those who said they were Jews and were not. They are referred to as the "**synagogue of Satan**" (Revelation 2:9). Their teaching falsely heralded salvation through law works rather than justification by faith through the grace of CHRIST. This teaching frustrated the grace of GOD and made void the death of CHRIST (Galatians 2:21). It offered a yoke impossible for man to bear (Acts 15:10). It merited GOD's curse: "**But though we, or an angel from Heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed**" (Galatians 1:8-9). Those who were Jews in truth, Abraham's true children, the Israel of GOD, were such as the Apostles and Paul, who magnified the law by permitting it to be a "schoolmaster" and lead them to CHRIST: "**Do we then make void the law**

through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law" (Romans 3:31) and "Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith" (Galatians 3:24). Accepting CHRIST as GOD's righteousness, they were saved by grace through faith.

PROPHECY FULFILLED

At the close of the first century all Apostles but John had died as martyrs. Then followed the second and third centuries, during which the Roman Empire endeavored to abolish Christianity with violence. Many outstanding instances of suffering, martyrdom and victory occurred. Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, before being burned at the stake was offered release if he would recant. He replied "Sixty and three years have I serve Him and He has done me nothing but good. Why should I deny Him now?" About 98 A.D. Simian, Bishop of Jerusalem, was crucified. About 115 A.D., Ignatius was cast to the lions. Justin Martyr was martyred in Rome. History tells of the terrible suffering of Poncthius, a lad of sixteen years of age: also of Blandina, a maiden slave, who, after being tortured from morning until evening and asked to recant, replied, "A Christian cannot recognize sin."

CHRIST's mention of ten days of suffering was marvelously fulfilled (Revelation 2:10). A day can mean twenty-four hours, a number of years, such as "**Abraham's day**," or a thousand years, such as the "**day of the Lord**." Before the close of third century ten attempts were made to blot out Christianity with violence. These attempts were associated with officially-issued edicts. These edicts continually attempted to force Christians to worship and place the State before CHRIST. Penalties for failure to obey varied. Christians refusing to obey edicts were threatened with loss of citizenship rights, confiscation of property, imprisonment, torture, and martyrdom. Millions suffered rather than disobey GOD's Word. In Nero's reign Christians were wrongly blamed for the burning of Rome. Covered with animal's skins, they were tortured to death by dogs. They were crucified. They were tarred and set afire as lamp posts to light the way for Nero's chariots.

The ten definite official attempts to blot out Christianity with violence occurred under the following emperors:

Nero 64 A.D.
Domitian 81 A.D.
Trajan 98 A.D.
Adrian 117 A.D.
Severus 193 A.D.
Maximin 235 A.D.
Decius 249 A.D.
Valerian 254 A.D.
Aurelian 270 A.D.
Diocletian..... 284 A.D.

VICTORY DESPITE MARTYRDOM

At times Christians were killed until weapons dulled. So many were destroyed by ferocious lions

that at times these animals, filled with human blood and flesh, refused to continue the attack. Christians, before packed amphitheaters and surrounded by roaring lions, went to death with triumphant praying, singing, and testimony. Others were known to arise in balconies, declare faith in CHRIST, and ask the privilege of dying for Him. Their requests were granted at times by their being tossed over balconies into the arena. While millions died as martyrs, greater numbers, affected by Christian faithfulness and testimony even in death, were saved.

During this entire period, heroic men risked their lives by addressing papers to Emperors and those in authority defending CHRIST and Christianity. Others, such as Marcus Aurelius, the pagan philosopher and Stoic, endeavored to explain away the triumphant suffering and martyrdom of Christians. History indicates that later he was affected by a remarkable prayer-answer for rain on the part of Christian soldiers. GOD then, as always, made all things "**work together for good to them that love Him**" (Romans 8:28), enabled His own to be "**more than conquerors**" through marvelous grace (Romans 8:37), and caused present, momentary, light affliction to work "**a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory**" (II Corinthians 4:17). The blood of martyrs then and since proved to be the seed of the Church.

It is written that a king, commanding a Christian to recant and give up CHRIST, said, "If you don't, I will banish you."

The man smilingly answered, "You cannot banish me from CHRIST: He says, '**I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.**' "

The king then angrily said, "I will confiscate your property." The Christian replied, "My treasures are laid up on high: you cannot get them."

The king in greater anger, said, "I will kill you." The Christian answered, "I have been dead with CHRIST to this world for forty years. My life is '**hid with Christ in God.**' You cannot touch it."

"What can you do with such a fanatic?" asked the king.

OVERCOMERS' REWARD

The Smyrna Church was exhorted and encouraged through CHRIST-given light regarding its suffering. CHRIST foredescribed its severity by mention of prison, tribulation and death. He explained that it originated with Satan and was permitted of GOD to test and use them, thus making their reward possible. He limits its duration to ten days. He states the condition and evidence of victory, which is faithfulness, even unto death. He promises victory, which is faithfulness, even unto death. He promises victors the wondrous martyr's crown of life, -- life sufficient to outweigh every earthly loss and human sacrifice, even that of physical life (2:10).

Christians who yielded and denied their faith in CHRIST were called "*Lapsi*"; Christians standing firm for CHRIST were called "*Confessors*"; Christians who died were called "*Martyrs*." CHRIST's words, "**He that hath an ear, let him hear,**" and, "**To him that overcometh,**" remind of individual responsibility. They assure individual possibility for glorious testimony for CHRIST, wondrous triumph in CHRIST, and heavenly reward from CHRIST. Such overcomers, though tested even with a martyr's death, were comforted by the assurance of

deliverance through CHRIST from the second death, which is the Lake of Fire: **"But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death"** (Revelation 21:8).

Though Satan might cause affliction, even unto physical death, he could not smite them with the second death. Thus they were assured that although loyalty to CHRIST caused sacrifice of all that the unsaved in this world count dear, the greatest of blessings, namely, salvation from a lost eternity, was theirs. Eternal gain in CHRIST would far outweigh any earthly loss. Those sacrificing everything in this life for CHRIST, but saved eternally, were enriched far beyond those gaining everything in this life but missing CHRIST and His salvation. How significant that these words should come from Him Who on a previous occasion said: **"And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell"** (Matthew 10:28).

They met the tyrant's brandish'd steel,
The lion's gory mane;
They bowed their necks, the death to feel:
Who follows in their train.

In Revelation 2:9: **"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"** we see that people are deceived because they have rejected the LORD, as one might expect if we were to compare Romans 1:18-21: **"For the wrath of God is revealed from Heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath showed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened."** You see, in these verse we are told that GOD gives up on man long after he has given up on Him.

However, in Revelation 3:9: **"Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee,"** we have illustrated for us 2 Thessalonians 2:11-12: **"And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness."** Here we see that GOD is going to cause them to be deceived - it is He that is going to send the delusion, the cause for them to go into blasphemy - because they waited too long to be saved.

In other words, what I am saying is that now, in the church age, GOD gives up on man only long after man gives up on GOD. Man has to go through degrees of unrighteousness before they actually become blasphemers.

But, after the rapture (after the church age) you can turn that equation around. GOD will give up on man before man can completely give up on Him - and they will become blasphemers because GOD has given up on them.

This is only those that had not heard and rejected the gospel before the rapture - otherwise, people will still have an opportunity to be saved. 2 Thessalonians is careful in this regard to specify only those that loved not the truth of the word that they might be saved, because they loved pleasure rather than righteousness.

This is a proof for the premillennial dispensational view of the pretrib rapture.

~ end of chapter 3 ~

<http://www.baptistbiblebelievers.com/>
