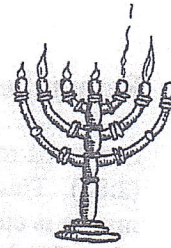


Journey Through Revelation

LESSON 4 . . . When You're Suffering (Revelation 2:8-11)



NOTES

The seven churches in *Revelation* represent seven different kinds of churches that will exist until Jesus comes. They also represent seven kinds of Christians, one of which is much like you. Therefore, you need to find yourself in the seven churches. We are now going to look at a suffering church, Smyrna. As Christians, we all suffer from time to time. We should expect it because what does Peter write in 1 Peter 4:12?

In our last lesson, we looked at the church in Ephesus, the church that had forsaken her first love. Now, our Lord has a message for *the angel*, or pastor, of the church in Smyrna (2:8a). Smyrna was located about 40 miles north of Ephesus in Asia Minor, present-day Turkey, (see map on page 10). In contrast to Ephesus, which today is nothing but ruins, Smyrna is the modern city of Izmir (iz'-meer) in Turkey. It is a modern, beautiful seaport city with a metropolitan population of over three million. It was known as Smyrna until the Turkish Postal Service Law of 1930 made "Izmir" the internationally recognized name.

Smyrna built a temple to the Emperor Tiberius in 23 B.C. Later, under the cruel emperor Domitian, emperor worship was required of all Roman subjects. Part of the required worship was once a year to say "Caesar is lord" while placing incense on an altar. Many Christians refused to say those words and would instead say, "Jesus is Lord," which often resulted in torture and execution. "Jesus is Lord" is the first Christian confession. Therefore, the Christians in Smyrna were suffering horribly for their faith.



We are living in a country that is quickly becoming like Smyrna. There is an overt, militant aggression against Bible-teaching churches. There is also a covert attack by some Hollywood filmmakers, who glamorize profanity, immorality, and violence. This should not surprise us. Why, according to Jesus, in John 15:18?

This letter to the church at Smyrna reveals **three** things to do when we are suffering.

Remember Jesus is eternal (2:8b-c).

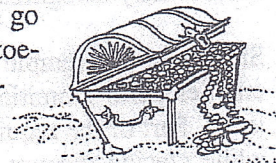
Our Lord reminds the church at Smyrna that He is *the first and the last* (2:8b). This is an Old Testament title for God (Isa. 44:6). Our Lord is saying He is eternal. He also identifies Himself as He *which was dead, and is alive* (2:8c). Our Lord transcends time, life, and death. Jesus is addressing Christians who are suffering so horribly they may have to die for their faith. He wants them to remember He is *the resurrection, and the life* (Jn 11:25b). Therefore, He makes what promise in John 11:25c-e?

Even if our suffering leads to death, the promise of Him *which was dead, and is alive* is we will live again with Him for eternity in heaven. When it comes to suffering, life usually isn't fair. That's the reason there's a heaven and a hell. Because Jesus is *the last*, He will one day make all things just and right.

When suffering, **remember Jesus is eternal** and . . .

Realize Jesus knows and cares (2:9-10c).

Jesus continues, *I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty* (2:9a). The word translated *tribulation* (THLIPSIS, th-lip'-sis) means severe suffering that brings anguish and distress. It is long-term suffering that doesn't go away in a few hours or days. The word translated *poverty* (PTÖCHEIA, toe-key'-uh) refers to extreme poverty, to the point of begging. Their *poverty* was probably the result of sanctions or persecution they faced in Smyrna. However, Jesus says, *(but thou art rich)* (2:9b). How does James 2:5b explain this phrase?



Our Lord says *I know* about a second thing. He knows *the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan*" (2:9c-d). Apparently, the Jewish synagogue in Smyrna was vicious in its *blasphemy*, or slander, of the Smyrnan believers. Because the Jews in Smyrna were trying to destroy the church, they were a *synagogue*, or instrument, of *Satan*.

Jesus knows the believers at Smyrna are suffering all sorts of persecution—governmental, economic, physical, religious, and satanic. He knows every detail of it all. When you are suffering, listen with spiritual ears of faith

and you will hear our Lord say, *I know*. He knows all about it because He knows everything, even to the point of having all the hairs on our heads numbered (Mt 10:30).

Jesus knows, but there is something about our Lord's knowledge of our suffering that is even more comforting. It is the fact He also understands all our suffering. How does Hebrews 4:15a state this truth?

The word translated *touched* (SYMPATHEŌ, sym-path-eh'-oh) means to feel sympathy, or be moved by our feelings. Jesus not only knows but also cares more than we will ever understand on this earth. That's why we are told to cast all our cares upon Him because He cares for us (1 Pet. 5:7).

One of the most difficult parts of suffering is feeling no one really cares how we feel or hurt. There is no suffering we go through that Jesus doesn't know about and, more importantly, care about. Therefore, when suffering, remember what promise in Psalm 55:22a?

In the letters to the seven churches, after the commendation there is usually a word of condemnation. However, there is **no word of criticism** for the suffering church in Smyrna. She's not perfect, but there is no outstanding sin in this church. The only other church that has no word of criticism from our Lord is the church at Philadelphia. It is no accident these two churches have no rebuke from the Lord. It is because they are enduring severe persecution.

There is truth in the old saying, "Persecution purifies the church!" Suffering can also be good for Christians. George Müller (1805-1898) was a famous English Christian who cared for over 10,000 orphans during his lifetime. He said, "Difficulties are food for faith to feed on."

Our Lord tells the believers at Smyrna: *Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer* (2:10a). This means more persecution is coming. Then, our Lord says: *behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried* (2:10b-c). This reveals the power behind the persecution is ultimately *the devil*.

The spiritual battle in Smyrna is just one skirmish in the earthly war that will continue until Jesus returns. The phrase *ten days* probably refers to a limited time of suffering. Suffering will not last forever and must be kept

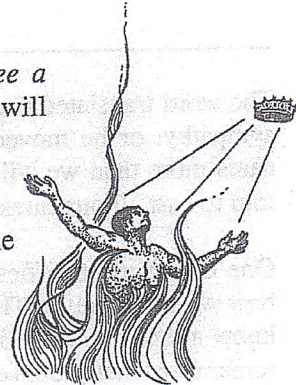
in perspective. Therefore, remember what truth in Romans 8:18?

When you are suffering, remember Jesus is eternal, realize Jesus knows and cares, and . . .

Refocus on the eternal reward (2:10d-11).

Our Lord continues, *be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life* (2:10d). Even if their persecutors put them to death, that will only result in them going to heaven and receiving the *crown of life*.

The word translated *crown* (STEPHANOS, stef'-an-os) refers to a garland, or wreath, of victory for an athlete or victorious general. The *crown of life* is an eternal reward for those who faithfully endure severe suffering. We will be *blessed* if we endure *temptation* (Jas. 1:12a). What does James write in James 1:12b?



As in all the letters to the churches, an exhortation is given to all who have an ear to listen to *what the Spirit saith* (2:11a). Then, our Lord says, *He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death* (2:11b). As mentioned in the previous lesson, all true believers are conquerors, or overcomers (1 Jn 5:5). However, in this passage Jesus is promising the *second death* will in no way affect true believers. The first death—physical death—is the separation of body and spirit. What is the *second death*, according to Revelation 20:14b?

At this *second death*, a person's spirit is separated from God for all eternity. If you are only born once, you will die twice—both physically and spiritually. On the other hand, if you are born twice, you will only die once—physically.

When you are suffering, remember Jesus is eternal, realize Jesus knows and cares, and refocus on the eternal reward.