

(Video of Smyrna)

Rome had a problem. The problem was how to unify its vast empire. The Roman Empire had become a vast conglomeration of cities and states and nations of differing races covering the whole known world at that time. Every race had its different cultural idiosyncrasies. How could there ever be a measure of unity needed in the maintenance of a world empire amidst such diversity?

But as great as this problem was, an answer began to emerge as the nation grew and prospered. The one thing that was capable of being universalized throughout the empire was the spirit of Rome itself. Rome was strong and mighty; Rome was technologically advanced; Rome was culturally refined; Rome was stable and secure; Rome had brought peace to the entire world. If this spirit could be promoted throughout the entire empire, then there could be a unity that could stand the test of time.

But then the next question arose. How could this type of spirit that would bring the unity be cultivated? And the answer again seemed to emerge obviously. With the Roman religious system, it was easy to add another deity who would embody this Roman spirit. Thus was born the worship of Dea Roma, the goddess of Rome. At first, this was a spontaneous and a voluntary worship, and was confined to segments of the empire. But then it went further. And as there was a vagueness about this conception of the spirit of Rome seemingly captured in the goddess of Rome, it became more and more apparent that there was one person who incarnated and embodied that spirit, one person who could represent that spirit - that person was the Roman emperor. In him, the spirit of Rome could be seen in visible form. So emperor worship began to be practiced. The early emperors drew back from this worship, but especially as the Empire reached its peak and then began to decline, emperor worship became more and more obvious for this unity of spirit was essential to the wellbeing of the empire. So the Emperors accepted this worship and even began to promote it vigorously, for the welfare of the Roman Empire.

Towards the end of the first century, when Domitian was ruling, when John was writing these letters to the 7 churches, Caesar worship had become compulsory. Once a year, every Roman citizen had to burn a pinch of incense on an altar to the god Caesar. Having done so, he was given a certificate to guarantee that he had performed this rite and was therefore loyal to Rome.

Now we must remember that the burning of this incense was not a test of a person's religious orthodoxy- it was rather a test of political loyalty. Rome couldn't care less about a person's religious practices- in this point Rome was extremely tolerant. Once a person had made his sacrifice and received his certificate, he could go out and worship any god or goddess that he desired provided that worship did not cause public unrest in the

kingdom. So the sacrificing of the incense was really not considered a religious practice as such, but rather it was a test of loyalty to Rome, and if a citizen refused to sacrifice to Caesar, if a citizen refused to declare Caesar to be lord, that person was automatically branded as disloyal to the empire.

All that the early Christians had to do was to burn a pinch of incense and say, "Caesar is Lord", receive their certificate and go away and worship as they pleased. But the early Christians realized the implications of such a practice. They considered the matter and felt that they could give to no human the name of Lord- that name was applicable only to Jesus Christ. That made early Christians outlaws in the Roman state, and opened the door to unbelievable persecutions. Christians were trying to undermine the unity of the Empire- they would be made examples so that others would not try to do the same.

Nowhere in the empire would this persecution have been more acute than in the city of Smyrna. As far back as 196 B.C., almost 300 years before this church received this letter from John, Smyrna had been the first city to erect a temple to Dea Roma, the goddess of Rome. In 26 A.D., just about the time Jesus was beginning his public ministry, Smyrna along with 10 other cities had applied for the privilege of erecting a temple to the Emperor Tiberius, and Smyrna had won the right to build such a temple. Smyrna was proud of her allegiance to Rome, and the citizens were very embarrassed by this growing group of Christians who appeared to be disloyal to the empire. They were deemed unpatriotic. And this brought on all kinds of persecutions to these Christians.

John mentions 5 different kinds of persecutions that these Christians in Smyrna had to suffer. The first 3 they had already been enduring, the last 2 were to come for some of them. Even though some of their midst had probably endured the last 2, the ones who were receiving the letter obviously had not. Let's look at these 5 forms of persecution that these Christians in Smyrna had to suffer.

1. First of all John speaks of their afflictions. "I know your afflictions." The Greek term that is used here is very literally "pressures". In a classical Greek passage, it was used in a story that told of a man who had a large rock roll over on him and the rock had pinned his leg to the ground putting great pressure on him. And this term was used quite consistently in that manner. If we were to use a modern term to be synonymous with it, it might be the word "stress".

There is a certain amount of pressure and stress that comes from just living in this world. There are the stresses of work, human relationships, sickness and poor health, and innumerable others. What is often forgotten by Christians is the fact that believers in Jesus Christ have to endure more stress than unbelievers for the sake of the gospel. In addition to all the other forms of stress that any human being bears that Christians also bear just by living in this world, the Christian also sets aside extra time for the Lord- a day to worship God as well as other time to study his word and serve him- this puts added stresses on his time. The

Christian sacrificially gives to the work of God giving his tithes and offerings- this puts added stress on his finances. The Christian is engaged in a battle with the greatest foe on this earth, the Devil himself. Untold stresses come forth from the continuous battle that believers face.

Now happily, God provides for the Christian what is needed to be able to function in this kind of stress, for otherwise none of us would be able to handle it. But the pressures are there. God knows that they are there, and he appreciates his children being willing to suffer these stresses for the cause of the gospel. John reminds these Smyrnan believers that Christ knew about their afflictions, their pressures, their stresses.

2. Secondly, John speaks of their poverty. "I know your afflictions and your poverty." There are 2 major words that are used for poverty in the New Testament. One speaks of the poverty of a person who has to work for a living. We must remember that there was a very small middle class in Biblical times. Most people were quite poor and a few people were very wealthy. The wealthy owned almost all of the land and had numerous servants who ran their estate for them. They never had to personally work for a living but they rather lived off of their vast assets. Those who did not have an abundance of wealth, but rather just had enough to get by so that he had to continue to work every day to pay the bills were called poor. Most of us would qualify for this state of poverty, but this is not the word John used here. The word he used is another Greek word for poverty that literally means destitution. This word spoke of the person who has nothing at all, who is scrambling for daily meals, who possibly doesn't even have a house to live in. The second word that describes dire poverty is the one chosen here by John.

It is ironic that John could use this term of these Christians because Smyrna was one of the wealthiest cities in the entire area. Smyrnans were wealthy because their allegiance to Rome had brought to them great dividends. But you see, these early Christians were assumed to be disloyal to the empire because they would not offer incense to the Emperor. Therefore, they were a threat to the prosperity of the people. Because of this, they were cast out socially often leading them into financial destitution. Likely, they couldn't make much of a living because few would do business with them, nobody would give to them a job and few would buy any of the products that they would make. Likely it was difficult for them to even find housing for the citizens of Smyrna did not want them living around there. Perhaps the Christians in Smyrna could have been comforted by the words written earlier in Hebrews: "you joyfully accepted the plundering of your properties since you knew that you had a better possession and an abiding one." Heb. 10:34. Yes, these Christians were called to suffer financially for their faith.

One of the very disturbing trends of our day is the attempt of many Christian leaders to unite belief in Christ with financial prosperity with the implication that those who are not wealthy are not really following the Lord. If a Christian is poor, they claim, this is an evidence of a lack of faith. We have coined a term for

their beliefs – we call it *prosperity theology*. Some of the largest churches in our country are led by prosperity theologians. But their teaching, while popular and welcome to the ears of many, could not be more contradictory to the Scriptures. This church at Smyrna is among the most praised of the 7 having the highest percentage of commendation to complaint, yet it was perhaps the poorest of all of the 7 churches with regards to material goods. Now God doesn't put a premium on financial poverty, and he does choose to bless his people at times with wealth and prosperity. But I think that we could all agree that being a Christian does cost a person in the riches of this world. If a person follows the teachings of Christ and therefore determines to have absolute integrity in his business dealings, he is working at a disadvantage with those in the world who do not operate with any scruples whatsoever and will cut any corner in order to make the extra profit. If a Christian chooses to obey the commands of Christ exercising generosity towards others financially, it is going to cost him to do this. Just the simple giving to the Lord's work is a sacrifice that God asks of his children demonstrating their love for him.

Now, granted, the Bible makes it clear that God will be a debtor to no person. He gives to us far more than we could ever give to him. And these practices that God encourages and even commands of us are for our own good, to curb that natural tendency that we all have towards greed. But being a Christian does require some financial sacrifice, and Christ appreciated the willingness of these Smyrnan believers to make this sacrifice. So he appreciates our willingness to sacrifice for his work. And the spiritual blessings received are so great that the financial sacrifices are not worthy to be compared with them. So John says, "I know your poverty- yet you are rich."

3. The third area is slander. "I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan." There were many who were formally of the Jewish faith who had become Christians in the church of Smyrna - in fact, the earliest Christians were all of Jewish origin. John considered these to be the true believers of the Scriptures for they had received Jesus as the Messiah sent from God. But there were many more who had rejected Jesus Christ and who therefore had rejected God the Father who had sent him. They were continuing on in the dead formalism of past traditions without any spiritual life whatsoever. These Jews were perhaps the most aggressive attackers against these early Christians, for they felt that these Christians had perverted their ancient practices. And they attacked the Christians in the most painful ways, the methodology learned from the Devil himself who is the accuser of the brethren. They slandered, they gossiped, their tongues were continually busy sowing false rumors.

It is painful to be misunderstood and caricatured. The natural tendency is to try to fight back, but these early Christians did not do that. As a result they suffered greatly with slander and misrepresentation. One of the common accusations against them was that they were cannibals. This accusation came as a result of their

practice of the Lord's Supper where they *ate the body and drank the blood of Christ*. Because early Christians exercised compassion rescuing little babies that were left to be exposed to the elements, they were accused of eating these babies during their communion services. The Romans were cruel and often heartless. They stressed the strength and power of the empire. They didn't practice abortion of unwanted children but would rather just leave the child out under a tree in the forest to die by exposure if a baby were unplanned or unwanted. Christians would go out and find these babies and raise them as their own in compassion. But, just like today, wicked unbelievers would seek to turn their good practices into evil. They would accuse them of eating these babies at their love feasts when they observed the Lord's Supper. And the Christians were easy targets because they didn't fight back. They were like Christ, who "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return. When he suffered, he did not threaten, but he trusted to him who judges justly." I Pet. 2:23. So these Christians often suffered great slander. But in time as they continued to serve the Lord and do good, they were recognized for their love and compassion and many of these evil practices like the exposure of infants and the sacrificing of people in gladiatorial games were outlawed.

4. There were 2 others areas mentioned here by John that would be suffered later. Other Christians had already suffered in these areas by this time, but obviously these Christians who were recipients of this letter had not or they would not be receiving this letter. The 4th area was that of being confined in prison. "Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for 10 days." The term 10 days was a Greek colloquial phrase for a "short time". So it is probably not to be taken as 10 - 24 hour days but rather that this imprisonment would just be short lived. And it was. For as these Christians were suffering, the pagan Romans who were satisfying their own cruel natures were also looking on even as they were slandering them with a measure of quiet admiration because they knew that something was different about these people. And it would not be long before Christianity would begin to make some great inroads into the Roman culture. Just over 200 years after John penned these words to the church at Smyrna, Christianity would be declared to be a legal religion in Rome and the formal persecution would end. Later, Christianity would be declared to be the official Roman religion with the emperor himself claiming Christ as his savior. These Smyrnans suffered so that others might have freedom. And so we are called upon sometimes to be imprisoned so that others might be free. And we who are now free because others have suffered in prison in the past must continually be thankful for their sacrifice and realize our responsibility to not take this freedom for granted, but rather maintain it for generations to come.

5. The final area of persecution was death. "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life." Some would be called upon to give up their lives for the cause of Christ. But to those who were willing to make this ultimate sacrifice, a crown of life was promised.

The word crown is stephanos in Greek- we get the name Stephen from this word. That's the reason why I often call Steve Danigelis (who is of Greek origin) Stephanos to remind him of his exalted position. Stephanos was used in 3 major ways when John used it here. It was not the royal crown, the one worn by the emperor, for there was another word for that crown. But it did have 3 main usages. First it was used for the crown of victory given in the athletic games. The one who won the race was given a laurel wreath symbolizing the fact that he had endured and won the race. Second, the word was used of the festal crown that was worn at marriages and on other joyous occasions. And thirdly, it was the crown given for faithful municipal service for someone who had served the community well for a given length of time. We bestowed such a crown verbally on our dear brother, Clarence Blakeslee, at his memorial service this past week as we spoke about the many years of service that he gave to this community earning him the title, Mr. Rockford.

And so it is with the Christian who endures the hardships of the Christian life well. Yes, there are sacrifices to be made. Stresses, financial sacrifices, slander, perhaps even imprisonment and death. But the one who endures those hardships will be rewarded by Christ. He will be recognized as the one who has gained the victory, he will be granted unqualified joy, and he will be recognized for his faithfulness in service.

Perhaps, the most attentive reader of this letter that John wrote was a man named Polycarp. Polycarp was the pastor of this church at Smyrna. He had studied under the Apostle John himself as a young man. And these words of John would be prophetic in his life, for on Feb. 22, 156 A.D. Polycarp would be arrested. He had fled from the city at the urging of his congregation, but the Roman authorities had tracked him down. Now, he made no further attempts to flee, but rather offered food and drink to his captors asking for permission to retire for prayer. 2 hours later, Polycarp came out of the room where he had been praying and peacefully accompanied his captors. All the way into Smyrna, they begged him to recant. "What harm can it do to offer incense to the emperor?" But Polycarp refused. Finally, he was sentenced to death. As he was bound to the stake with the straw and sticks stacked beneath him awaiting the torch, he was again asked for the final time. "Have respect for your old age. . .Swear by the genius of Caesar. . .Swear and we will release you. . .revile the Christ." To this final attempt, Polycarp gave these famous words, "Eighty and six years I have served him, and he has done me no wrong; how then could I blaspheme the king who saved me?"

In moments, the flames surrounded Polycarp and he passed from this life into the next. Who knows how much comfort these words written by the Apostle John a few decades before brought to Polycarp at this critical time of testimony in his life? For Jesus Christ was waiting for Polycarp with a crown in his hands just as John promised that he would be. A crown symbolizing victory, joy and a reward for faithful service. The same type of crown that will await you and me if we are willing to suffer the cost of discipleship for the Lord.