

### *"Smyrna: The Suffering Church"*

Last week, almost without fanfare, a dangerous, sinister law was passed in the Senate attached to a military appropriations bill. Rev. Tim Crater writes in his monthly newsletter,

"the new assistant attorney general in charge of the Civil Rights Division says he will fight discrimination against gays vigorously. Tom Perez says new legislation will allow him to attack discrimination against lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender people. He's likely thinking of the Hate Crimes bill, which passed the Senate this week and will now go to the president for signature. Gays will now focus on ENDA (employment discrimination against gays), gays in the military, and ending the many defense of marriage acts (i.e., one male/one female marriage laws, otherwise known as normalcy).

Everywhere these laws have been passed they have been used to persecute those who do not accept the moral neutrality of sodomy in every form. This legislation is ominous because it seeks to punish thought not just actions. This is another step toward the eventual persecution of Christians in America, and it rightly concerns every thoughtful Christian.

It makes the sermon today more relevant than ever to Christians in these United States, but it has been relevant for a long time to many others who have suffered all over the world.

Smyrna is "the suffering church." The city of Smyrna is the second of seven chosen by the Lord Jesus to receive open letters. The name of the city means "to treat with Myrrh" (a chief spice used on dead bodies). Its very name speaks of death and therefore, suffering. How appropriate that Smyrna is the suffering church!

To this suffering church Jesus identifies himself as the one who has suffered death- and overcome it with resurrection life! *"These are the words of him who is the first and the last, who died and came back to life again."* What a comforting realization that Jesus Christ is absolutely sovereign. He is eternal; The first and the last, the Alpha and the Omega. He has been beyond and back. He knows what it is to experience death, and he also knows what it is to experience resurrection.

Jesus says, *"I know your afflictions and your poverty-yet you are rich!"* Are you one of the suffering believers today? Jesus knows your affliction.

It could be you are suffering with the loss of physical health or the decay of years. Jesus knows and Jesus cares!

Often with affliction, persecution comes the suffering of poverty. When we're sick we can't work, and when we can't work, we don't have enough. Jesus understands our afflictions. Remember, He said that "the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." He knows what it is to do without. He's been there. Often when we have so little of this world's goods, we come to understand how spiritually rich we really are. And often the riches of this world blind us to the greater riches of the spiritual world. Jesus often said that nothing so interferes with spiritual life as the love of material possessions.

### **I. The message to the Christians of Smyrna (95A.D).**

These believers in the city of Smyrna, were experiencing persecution and suffering. We may assume that at 95 A.D., theirs was a local persecution. Yet the Lord Jesus picks this city as the example of the suffering church, which will extend from 64 A.D. to 313 A.D. No doubt, they were about to experience *10 intense literal days* of persecution. For the church at Smyrna in the first century, those were real, literal days.

Jesus also takes note of the slander from the Jewish community at that time. The early church suffered a great deal of persecution from Jews in the first century precisely because the Christians were virtually emptying the synagogues of their Gentile disciples. Paul would come to town, preach the gospel in the synagogue. As a result, some Jews and many proselytes to Judaism would believe the gospel and follow Paul. Then Paul started his rival church, across town or across the street, and the Jews in the synagogue were very angry. Instead of believing in Jesus as Messiah, they rejected him, the apostle Paul, and the Christians. Consequently they saw them as a threat and persecuted them. Those who claim to be Jews should be people of faith in the Messiah, Jesus Christ. The Lord himself was a Jew, Paul was a Jew. All the believers at the start of the church were Jews. Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, but they rejected him. So Jesus rejects their claim to be real Jews and says, they inhabit a synagogue of Satan. Those are very strong words, and they come from the lips of the Savior. When a person rejects Christ, ultimately, he is a son of Satan. There are only two options. You were either born of the Spirit of God and belong to him, or you are "of your father the devil." There is no ground in between. Jesus said that, I did not make that up!

### **II. The message to the suffering church (64-313 A.D.).**

The Lord Jesus knew, well ahead of time, that his church was going to suffer under the Roman persecutions. To follow a man who was crucified as a criminal and an enemy of the State lines up a movement for persecution. It was inevitable; the clash between Caesar and Christ. Either Caesar is Lord or Christ is Lord, and there is no ground in between.

In verse 10, Jesus says, *"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."*

First of all we need understand that although God is sovereign, the devil is a hateful enemy. The devil hates Christians with such a passion that we cannot believe it! Jesus said the devil was a liar and a murderer from the beginning. There is nothing new in the persecution and vilification of Christians by the left. The spirit that now works in the sons of disobedience is behind all of this. "The whole world lies in the power of the evil one!"

"Yes Virginia, there is a Satan!" Satan is alive and well on planet Earth. The devil and his angels stir up hatred for God's people, God's Word and God's institutions (home, family) and God's moral standards. This world is no friend to Jesus Christ. The same "spirit that now works in the sons of disobedience," (Eph 2:1) has always worked in this world against believers. If Satan cannot get to God, he will do the next best thing, he will get to those whom God loves (Job 1-2).

Persecution is used by God to test us, but by Satan to tempt us. God allows it, and Satan does it. God permits it, but Satan delivers it.

God is sovereign in what he allows us to experience. Jesus reminds them ahead of time they will experience 10 days of persecution; Not 11 days, not two weeks. He limits the extent of it. He limits the effect of the persecution. He controls every event and to whom persecution comes. Persecution tests our faith and proves it. Persecution refines us when we come through it successfully. It purges us of our love of this world and puts things in perspective. It separates the wheat from the chaff and purifies the church. Under persecution, we are tried and found as gold. Persecution causes us to glorify God, if we respond to it correctly.

We now know historically, that there were 10 major persecutions of Christians in the Roman Empire. It is very likely, that these words predict those persecutions. Ten days symbolically refer to ten individual persecutions, that stretched from 64-313 A.D.

### **III. The Message to Us**

The words of Jesus to his church apply to all of us today. *"Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life."* The crown of life is the martyr's crown given to those who are faithful to the point of death. Although we in this country, The United States, have never experienced this, thousands of believers all around the world IN THE LAST CENTURY have died for their faith. In fact, there have been more Christian martyrs in the 20th century than there ever were in all of the centuries before. According to modern estimates, more Christians have died for their faith in the 20th century than in the previous 19. Those are sobering statistics. When you consider the millions who were butchered in China when the Communists took over in 1949; when you consider all of the persecutions by the Communists in Vietnam in North Korea and in a dozen other communist countries. You understand how many believers have suffered for their faith. Add to that the believers killed by Moslems and Hindus and the list is enormous. Wherever the left takes power, suffering, affliction and persecution soon follow. But what does Jesus say to us?

*"Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer."* **Why not?**  
Jesus gives us FOUR REASONS—

**1. First, God is in control of your suffering.**

*"Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison... and you will have tribulation ten days."*

God has already determined the length of time your suffering will last and the severity it will reach. *"There is no test, temptation or trial that has come upon you, but such as is common to man, and God is faithful, who with the temptation will make a way of escape that you may be able to bear it" (1 Cor 10:13).* God will never take you where his grace cannot keep you. So, the first reason not to be afraid of persecution is Jesus is in control. But there is another good reason.

**2. Second, this is only a test.**

Jesus says, *"that you may be tested"* The persecution intended by Satan to harm us is designed by Christ to strengthen us. This life is but a brief moment when compared to eternity. It is the proving ground for our character- and persecution accomplishes spiritual development. God has his purposes in all that he allows.

Evangelist [Paul Ai](#) knows this firsthand. He was jailed for more than ten years in the communist nation of Vietnam for his faith in Christ. However,

communist authorities expelled him from the country because so many prison inmates and guards were coming to Christ because of his witness behind bars!

Does persecution hurt? Yes! Is pain real? Yes!  
Does it hurt to lose a job because you stand for Christ? Yes!  
Does it cost to lose your freedom and be thrown into prison? Yes!  
Does Jesus understand what people are going through? Absolutely!  
Has he suffered as much or more? Absolutely!  
Did he suffer for you? You bet he did!  
Do we really appreciate it? Are we really thankful? Are we ready to enter into his sufferings, if called? Persecution may be painful, but it will not last! "Weeping will last for the night, but joy comes in the morning."

Three months ago Rifqa Bary made the news by fleeing from his Muslim family in Ohio to Florida because she said she feared her father would kill her for secretly converting from Islam to Christianity. Authorities placed her in Ohio's custody where she'll stay with a foster family and undergo counseling. Its utterly amazing that at 17 she can have an abortion without her parents even being informed, but she isn't old enough to choose her faith! Her life is still in great danger, yet authorities are not responding to it. COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) —

The third reason Jesus tells us not to be afraid of suffering is-

### **3. Any Suffering we endure will ultimately be worth it.**

*"Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life."*

It will be worth it all, when we see Jesus,  
Our trials will seem so small, when we see Christ  
One glimpse of his dear face, all sorrows will erase,  
So bravely run the race, till we see Christ.

Do your trials right now seem overwhelming? They will be short, and they will be rewarded. Jesus said to him who suffers unto death, *"I will give the crown of life."* The crowns of the Bible make an interesting study. There are actually five crowns mentioned. These are not the crowns of kings, but the crowns of victors. The Greek word here is not "diadem," but it is "stephanos."

Our daughter's name "Stephanie" means "Victor's Crown" or the "crowned one". We named her that she might run this race in her Christian life and gain that crown one day. He was always to be the motivating force of her life. "Stephanos" is the crown of laurel-leaves the

victor in the Olympic Games received. This is the victor's crown it as a reward for faithfulness and sacrifice. The Bible talks a lot about rewards. Jesus isn't bashful about them. "He is no fool," Jim Elliott said, "who gives up what he cannot keep in order to gain what he cannot lose."

**4. The Fourth reason not to be afraid of suffering is, it can't really hurt you vs. 11.**

*"He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death."*

The news wires carried this article posted 4/20/2007 09:31AM  
**I**n a gruesome assault against Turkey's tiny Christian community, five young Muslim Turks entered a Christian publishing office in the southeastern province of Malatya Wednesday and slit the throats of the three Protestant Christians present. Two of the victims, Necati Aydin, 36, and Ugur Yuksel, 32, were Turkish converts from Islam. The third man, Tilmann Geske, 46, was a German citizen. These three men were murdered because they were publishing Christian literature. They were faithful unto death – and they will receive the martyr's crown.

In the end death itself cannot hurt us. We don't have to worry about the first death. Everyone dies, it is only a matter of time unless Christ returns first. Jesus said do not fear the one who can only kill the body, fear him who after he has killed has the power to cast you into an eternal hell. This is the second death. What Jesus promised to us is clear. As Christians we cannot suffer that ultimate and fatal loss.

Rev 20:14-15 describes the second death.

What about you? Do have the assurance of knowing that if death should come to you, that you will be saved from the second death? Have you put your faith in the Person of Jesus Christ alone for your salvation? Will you not put your faith in Him today?