

⁸ “And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, ‘These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life: ⁹ “I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and *I know* the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but *are* a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰ Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw *some* of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹ “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.””

Introduction

This is the shortest of the 7 letters to the Churches, but it contains only praise for this Church. There are no critical remarks or challenges from Jesus.

Smyrna was one of the most beautiful places to live. They say in the Kansai region that you should be educated in Kyoto, work in Osaka, but live in Kobe.

This is because Kobe is a beautiful place to live. I lived there for 4 years and I always like visiting the city.

Like Kobe Smyrna had a lovely harbour, with mountains behind it. It was a wealthy trading city.

One of characteristics of the city is that it was a very loyal supporter of the Roman Empire and of the city of Rome itself. It was the first city in the world to erect a temple to the goddess “Roma”.

There was one big problem for the Christians in that city and that was persecution.

If you were a faithful Christian, then, you could not follow the crowd and worship “Rome” or any of the goddesses in that city. The normal way of life for christians was to suffer persecution.

The most famous documented incident of persecution was on Saturday 23rd February A.D. 155.

Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna was martyred. He was killed for his faith in Jesus.

The incident is recorded in Church history and I would like to tell you the story for your encouragement.

At the time of the incident there were public games being held in the city.

It was something like our Olympic Games. There were lots of events taking place in a great arena.

Somebody shouted, let us kill the Christians. The crowd joined in and eventually the authorities found the leader of the Christian Church, a man named Polycarp.

While Polycarp was being taken to the stadium for execution the policeman gave him the opportunity of avoiding death. He was told that if he was to say “Caesar is Lord” and to offer a sacrifice, then he would be saved.

However, Polycarp was adamant that for him only Jesus Christ was Lord.

When he entered the arena a voice came from heaven saying

“Polycarp be strong”

Polycarp was finally given the choice in front of the crowd of cursing the name of Jesus Christ and making a sacrifice to Caesar or death.

He said these words:

“86 years I have served Jesus and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”

The leader of the town threatened to burn Polycarp to death, Polycarp replied “You threaten me with the fire that burns for a time, and is quickly quenched, for you do not know the fire which awaits the wicked in the judgement to come and in everlasting punishment.

Why are you waiting, come and do what you will.”

After this Polycarp prayed a wonderful prayer and then the crowds tried to burn him to death. Instead of Polycarp being burnt to death, the fire made a ring around him, protecting him from the people. It must have been an amazing sight.

Later an executioner was ordered to kill Polycarp with a sword. The crowd noticed that there was something different about Polycarp who died a Martyr's death.

The difference was that God was with him, yes he died but God gave him great grace and strength.

Polycarp is in paradise awaiting his bodily resurrection and we will see him one day, if we know and love the Lord Jesus as our own personal saviour.

Smyrna was a difficult place for Christians to live, but the Church was rich in their "faith"

Now let us come to the text to discover what God would teach us today from this passage.

There are 4 sections in these verses before us that draw out the meaning of the passage.

The first is:

Smyrna under Trial

The letter informs us that there were three trials for the Church at Smyrna.

These were :

1. Tribulation – The Greek word that is used here originally meant crushing under a weight. The pressure on the Church in Smyrna was great. It is difficult to imagine what the Christians were going through at this time. However, we do know that it hurt them very deeply, both physically and emotionally.
2. Poverty - Poverty and Christianity in the New Testament are closely connected. Paul described the Christians at Corinth as being poor yet making many rich. (2 Cor.6:10)
James speaks of God choosing the poor in this world to be rich in faith. (James.2:5)
The Greek word to describe the poverty of the Christians in Smyrna actually means completely destitute.
They had nothing. Only the grace of God working miracles in their situation would provide what they needed to live on.
Most people in the western world have never had to face total destitution. There is always someone who can help you in your need.
In this Church all the Christians had nothing.
God would have had to work through non-believers to provide for them. If they did not respond, then God would have had to feed them from His mighty hand in the way that He did for His people in the wilderness with "Manna Bread"
If someone had written a book at the time called, " How God provided for the church in Smyrna" it would have made interesting reading.
3. Imprisonment - John prophesies an imprisonment of 10 days.
The Bible scholars tell us that ten days was an expression for a short time. At this time in history in this place it was against the law to be a Christian. A great deal of the time the letter of the law was not kept. Persecution came in short sharp waves.
It appears that Jesus was encouraging the church that persecution was only going to be for a period of time.
I know one thing and that is, when a person is going through a very difficult time, the best encouragement that they can receive is to know that this suffering is not forever.
If we are a Christian today, whatever suffering we might be challenged to go through, it will not be forever.
Compared to eternity in heaven, our suffering on this earth is only for a short time.

Smyrna - The cause of the Trial

Who was it that caused all the problems for the Christian people?

Sadly, it was the Jewish people themselves.

They are described in v. 9 as the Synagogue of Satan.

We will come to that expression in a moment.

Many times in the book of Acts we see how the Jews stirred up the authorities against the Christian preachers.

It happened in many places in the book of Acts when the early Church began its ministry.

1. Acts 14: v.2 in the N.L.T.

² Some of the Jews, however, spurned God's message and poisoned the minds of the Gentiles against Paul and Barnabas.

2. Acts 14: v.19 in the N.K.L.

¹⁹ Then some Jews arrived from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowds to their side. They stoned Paul and dragged him out of town, thinking he was dead.

3. Acts 17: v.5-8 in the N.L.T.

⁵ But some of the Jews were jealous, so they gathered some troublemakers from the marketplace to form a mob and start a riot. They attacked the home of Jason, searching for Paul and Silas so they could drag them out to the crowd. ⁶ Not finding them there, they dragged out Jason and some of the other believers instead and took them before the city council. "Paul and Silas have caused trouble all over the world," they shouted, "and now they are here disturbing our city, too. ⁷ And Jason has welcomed them into his home. They are all guilty of treason against Caesar, for they profess allegiance to another king, named Jesus." ⁸ The people of the city, as well as the city council, were thrown into turmoil by these reports.

The story of what happened in Antioch shows how the Jews often succeeded in moving the authorities to take action against the Christians.

Acts 13:50 -52 in the N.L.T.

⁵⁰ Then the Jews stirred up the influential religious women and the leaders of the city, and they incited a mob against Paul and Barnabas and ran them out of town. ⁵¹ So they shook the dust from their feet as a sign of rejection and went to the town of Iconium. ⁵² And the believers were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

It is amazing that all these years later Satan is still using these tactics.

He tries to influence the minds of people by proving negative thoughts about Christians and by people complaining to the authorities about Christians.

So why use the expression, the Synagogue of Satan.

John is taking a favourite expression of the Jews and then reversing it.

When the Jewish people met together they called themselves the "Assembly of the Lord" (Numbers 16:3,20:4,31:16)

What John is saying is "You call yourself the assembly of God, when in fact you are the assembly of the devil."

These are strong words against "Religious People"

God hates "Religion" because it is man's idea to substitute the grace of God with legalistic ideas on how to live your life.

Any attempt to substitute the "Grace of God" with anything else, no matter how sincere it may appear, is something that God hates.

It is an attack against His character and upon His Son Jesus Christ who left the glory of heaven to come to this world in order to mend the broken relationship that God has with his created people.

Smyrna – The claims of Christ and His challenge

In v. 8-9 we notice the claims that Jesus Christ makes about Himself and also the challenge that He brings to this Church and to us.

- a) Jesus Christ is the First and the Last. In the Old Testament this title is a title that belongs to God. Let us look up Isaiah 44: v. 6.

⁶ “Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel, And his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: ‘I *am* the First and I *am* the Last; Besides Me *there is* no God.

This title of Jesus has 2 aspects.

To the Christian it is a great encouragement and to the non-Christian seeking their own glory it is an attack upon their human pride.

If you are a Christian today, Jesus is saying that whatever happens in your life, the risen Lord Jesus will be with you from the first day of your life right through until the end and beyond.

You do not need to be afraid.

Jesus created this world and He is going to end it.

Jesus knew you when you were in the womb and he will see you through to heaven.

To the Non-believers in Smyrna it was a warning.

They loved their city, they were proud of it and were striving for man-made glory. They wanted to hold on to their worldly goods and live on this earth forever.

Jesus Christ was going to judge them one day and they would not live forever.

Jesus Christ is the only one who is to be praised, worshipped and glorified.

If you don't worship Jesus, then you are going to worship something else. The problem is that Jesus is the first and the last, all other idols or forms of worship will one day be destroyed.

- b) The second claim of Jesus Christ is that He died and came to life again.

This is a reference to the resurrection of Jesus.

Jesus said these words “ I know your afflictions”.

Jesus had experienced something of what the Church at Smyrna was presently experiencing.

Jesus died in the agony of the crucifixion. He knew all about suffering.

Jesus Christ can help us in our suffering because He has been through it too.

The positive side is that through His suffering on the cross and God's wrath poured upon Him, is that He triumphed over death and suffering to a victorious life in heaven.

Whatever the devil throws at us, the worst that can happen is that we can go to Heaven and be with Jesus.

- c) Finally in this section there is a challenge from Jesus. The challenge is for loyalty when death is the price to be paid.

Someone once said

“ If all the other qualities of life were placed in the balance against it, loyalty would outweigh them all.”

The challenge to us today is “are we loyal to Jesus and the ministry of the local Church, in our case that is Osaka International Church?

Loyalty always costs, time, money and commitment to serve.

I hope that we will always be loyal to the one who died for us and set us free from the chains of death and hell.

Smyrna – The promised reward

Jesus Christ is in debt to nobody and loyalty to Him will bring its own reward.

In this passage two rewards are mentioned.

The first is the crown of life.

There are two Greek words that are used for the word “crown”

The first is the word “diadem” which means the Royal Crown.

This is the type of crown that a king would wear on his head.

The second word is “stephanos” which usually has something to do with “joy” and “victory”.

It is not the royal crown that is being offered to the Christian, it is the crown of joy and victory.

The second reward was not to be hurt by the second death.

The term “second death” is not used in any other New Testament book.

It does appear in other places in Revelation. (20:6, 20:14, 21:8)

We are told in Revelation 20: v. 14 that the second death is the “lake of fire”

It goes on to say that if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, they would be thrown into the lake of fire.

It goes like this. Everybody is going to die one day. In the future, everybody is going to be raised from the dead for judgement by Jesus Christ.

The believers in Jesus will be given eternal life, and the non-believers will have like a second death and will be punished eternally in a lake of fire.

Jesus clearly tells the believers in Smyrna that they will not be hurt at all by the second death. They will be saved from the punishment of their sins.

The people at the time all believed that when they died, that was the end of their existence. They believed that there was nothing further to come, good or bad.

Some people also believe that today.

So what practical applications can we draw from this passage about our lives here in Japan and our spiritual life here at O.I.C.

1. Suffering persecution as a Christian is not a negative experience in the eyes of God. Japan is not a Christian country. If you are going to be a disciple for Jesus, some people may make your life difficult.
God will honour every step you take in being a witness for Him. The Holy Spirit will strengthen and help you if you suffer abuse or rejection from family or friends.
2. The power of evil in this world is not the final power. The devil will always oppose God's will and sometimes it appears that he is winning the battle against Christians.
However there is a limit to the devil's power.
Nevertheless it hurts when Christians are persecuted and murdered for their faith.
How does this work out practically in our lives?
As a Christian we need to face up to life on this earth.
It is not heaven and bad things happen to good Christians.
We must not always expect positive experiences in the Christian life.
When we become a Christian, it is not like joining a cruise ship and sailing from Kobe to the Japanese Islands.
It is like joining a Battle Ship and going to war with Satan and his agents.
The negative and harmful things in our life are like a golf ball.
When they first manufactured a golf ball the ball was nice and smooth.
However after a while when the ball got dents and was roughed up they discovered that it travelled further.
This is why golf balls are made with little dents on them.
It is the same in the Christian life.
The difficult things we go through in life draw us closer to Jesus and we go further in our understanding of GRACE and the true Christian life.
I could tell you about many bad things that I have been through as a Christian. That will not help you. But what will help you is to tell you that God has used these experiences to bring spiritual growth in my life.
Without these experiences I would be a poorer Christian.
I was reminded about a preacher from America who came to preach at a conference full of missionaries in Karuizawa, in Japan. After a week of meetings, the organiser said, thank you for coming, but we will not be asking you back until you have suffered.
The pastor from America was quite offended, he had worked hard to prepare good teaching for the missionaries.
When he returned to America he went through some difficult times and he suffered a great deal.
It was only after that experience as he drew closer to God that he realised the truth behind what the man said to him in Karuizawa.

Quote James 1: v. 2-4.

² My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, ³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. ⁴ But let patience have *its* perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

(Special time of prayer for the persecuted Church)

Put the requests on some slides and have an open time of prayer in small groups.