



BEDWELL GLOBAL MINISTRIES

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“WHAT JESUS THINKS OF HIS CHURCH”

SERIES TWO

SMYRNA – THE CHURCH OF SUFFERING SAINTS

Scripture Reading – Revelation 2: 8-11.

Introduction

Last week we noted that the church at Ephesus had lost her love for Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus pointed out how serious it was for a church who claimed to be of part of His Body, to lose her first love for Him. He starts His assessment of the seven churches in Asia with the one church that had lost her first love for Him. The Lord called attention to the church at Ephesus to point out that this meant she had fallen from a great height. He commanded her to repent of this sin and if she did not repent, He would remove her lamp stand from its place. She would be expelled from her place in the Body of Christ, which is an indication of how serious Jesus considered this sin to be. This is a message with a personal note to it. What applies to the church is what applies to each of us because we are the church. This is extremely noteworthy because it has to do with the heart of a relationship with Him. A lost love means a lost relationship, and a lost relationship reduces the

church to another human or religious organization. Tragically it reduces the Christian to one whose religion becomes a form of godliness denying the power thereof. It is a lifestyle that lacks reality and vitality. An important challenge from Jesus resounds in the precincts of the church “He, who has an ear to hear, let Him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” The call of the Spirit is for the church at Ephesus to repent of her sin. Losing a first love for Christ is no small matter because the first mark of the true and living church is love.

John Stott points out that the second mark is suffering. The one is consequent on the other. They are dependent on one another. A willingness to suffer proves the genuineness of love. “Is it not true that we are willing to suffer for those we love?” The Christians at Smyrna had clearly not lost their love for Jesus, for they were ready to suffer for Him. She was the church of the suffering saints, yet no complaint was heard from her. Suffering need not stifle the song in the heart. Do you remember Peter and John how they rejoiced that they had been counted worthy of suffering for the Name?” Acts 5:41. Do you remember how after they had been beaten and put in stocks they sang at the midnight hour? Acts 5:41. They suffered joyfully because of a passionate love for the Lord Jesus Christ.

The letter written to the Church at Smyrna is the shortest of the letters written to the seven churches. It is one of two letters in which there is no complaint or condemnation from the Lord Jesus Christ. In 23 B.C. the City of Smyrna was given the honor of building a temple to the Emperor Tiberius because of its faithfulness to Rome. As a result the city had become the centre of cult worship – a fanatical religion that later under such Emperors as Nero and Domitian resulted in intense persecution of the early church at Smyrna. It is in this context that the letter is written to the church. It is a message of encouragement and exhortation with the promise of fulfillment and reward. Jesus once again is assessing His church. Again as He did in Ephesus he says, “I know your afflictions and your poverty.” “I KNOW are the key words. I know your suffering and His evaluation is based on His knowledge. Because this message to Smyrna is from Jesus Himself we should give it our full attention to it.

Note first of all,

1. CHRIST’S WORD OF CLARIFICATION. Revelation 2:8-11.

He makes clear to the church who He is. “These are the words of Him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.” Jesus gives a word clarification about His,

a.His Character. Revelation 2:8-11. The one who is speaking to the church calls Himself “The First and the Last, who died and came to life again.” In this

statement we have two great titles of the Risen Christ. He calls Himself the “First and the Last.” This is an Old Testament title for God, indicating that the Lord Jesus Christ is God. John MacArthur Says the “He is the eternal infinite God who already existed when all things were created, and who will continue to exist after they are destroyed. Jesus Christ transcends time, space and creation.” MacArthur (Rev. p.68-69). I am the First and the Last. Jesus points out two truths about Himself in the statement. First He refers to Himself as

i. The Crucified Christ. Revelation 2:8 “I am the First and the Last who died....” “I was dead.” There is a package of truth in those words **“was dead.”** The church would instinctively know what He meant by that death. John his Revelation refers to that death and describes Jesus as the Lamb who was the perfect sacrifice crucified to take away the sins of world. In Revelation chapter 1v. 5. John writes, “to Him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood..... To Him be glory and power for ever and ever.” Silhouetted against background of John’s Revelation is the shadow of a Cross. Indeed the events described in the Book of the Revelation would have never been written if were not for the Man of the Cross. This man who stands in the midst of His seven churches is the crucified Christ. It is He who creates the church in the power and provision of His death. He, who suffered unspeakable shame, indescribable humiliation and excruciating agony on a Roman cross, talks to His suffering church at Smyrna. He knows what intense suffering is, and is able to speak to that suffering. He can stand alongside His church, with a deep understanding and unquestionable authority, because He knew and experienced the pain of His suffering. It was the depth and intensity of His suffering on a Cross which no one but Him could experience or had experienced before or since. “I am the first and the Last who was dead....” This, however, is only part of the truth. He not only describes Himself as the crucified Christ or as the one who was dead, but also as

ii. The Conquering Christ. Revelation 2:8. “I am the First and the Last who died and came to life again.” That phrase “came to life again.” What irresistible power there is in that truth. ““He came alive again.” This announces the victory of God. Jesus is the conquering Christ. That proclamation sends a shudder in hosts of hell. He came alive again. They failed to keep Him in the grave. Peter knew that to be true for in his message on the day of Pentecost he boldly and with unshakable conviction declared that “It was impossible for death to keep its hold in Him.” Jesus said “I died and came to life again.” This is the Risen Christ resplendent in His glorious sovereignty and His irresistible power. “Paint Christ,” Cried Tommaso Campanella to the Italian painters of his day, “Paint Christ, not dead but risen, with His foot in scorn on a split rock with which they sought to

hold Him down! Paint Him as the conqueror of death! Paint Him as the Lord of Life. Paint Him as the irresistible Victor who, tested to uttermost, has proved Himself in very deed mighty to save.” **It is the conquering Christ who speaks the word of encouragement to His suffering church at Smyrna.**

It was the Apostle Paul who recognized the importance of the truth of a living Jesus. The truth of the resurrection, you recall, is the basis on which he appeals to the Christian to face adversity with faith, strength and courage. Writing to young Timothy in Ephesus in I Timothy 2:3. He says “Endure hardship like a good soldier of Jesus Christ.” The reason he gives this challenge to be strong and endure hardship is reinforced in I Timothy 2:8-10. “Remember Jesus Christ was raised from the dead.” This is my Gospel for which I am suffering. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect.” It is the Risen Christ who is the foundation of hope, inspiration of faith and the reason for courage. Jesus not only gives us clarification about who He is. The second truth Jesus clarifies is His knowledge of their,

b. Their Condition or Circumstances. Revelation 2:9-10. “I know your affliction and your poverty – yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.”The afflictions about which Jesus is speaking here are not simply the common trials of life.

Their tribulation was a consequence of their being Christians. It was a result of their commitment to Christ and His mission in the world. The word tribulation has the thought of pressure producing actual suffering and intense agony. The church at Smyrna was taking a beating because of their stand for Christ. Jesus was aware of the pain of their persecution. Jesus said to His church “I know your affliction.” He also says “I know your poverty, yet you are rich.” **This seems to be a paradoxical statement.** Jesus, however, was talking about wealth on two levels or in two dimensions.

i. The church was poor on the material level. Revelation 2:9 I know your poverty.”Their property had been confiscated. They had suffered loss of all things. The word used for poverty does not simply mean poor, it means destitution. They had nothing at all, but Jesus said,

ii. The Church was rich on the eternal level. Revelation 2:9 “you are rich.” This is wealth stored in heaven. Jesus made clear that He would give them the crown of life. This kind of wealth cannot be destroyed by moth, or corroded by rust or taken by thieves. It is secure. They were rich on the eternal level. But the church at Smyrna was also a victim of the slanderous tongue. Jesus knew about this as well. I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not.”

False rumors were circulation about the church. Minds were being poisoned. Misrepresentations were being made to the point of wounding the church. And if that was not enough, Jesus went on to say in verse 10 “I tell you that the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. The reference to 10 days must not be taken literally for it is normal Greek phrase meaning a short time. The personal pain they were experiencing was intensified by being told that there was much more to come. The picture that Jesus painted is clear. Nothing was hidden from them, but it did not deter them- they endured triumphantly. This was Christ’s word of clarification to the church. Note secondly,

2. CHRIST’S WORD OF COMMAND. Revelation 2:10-11.

There are two commands that emerge as significant in this message to the church. Verse 10 “Do not be afraid...” v.11. “Be faithful.....” The first is the command to,

a. Fearlessness. Revelation 2:10. “Do not be afraid.....” On the human level there was every reason for fear. There was fierce persecution, abject poverty, malicious slander and probable imprisonment and impending death. These early Christians were surrounded by a formidable array of disaster, pain and persecution. Surely no one would blame them for retreat or capitulation. Note that Jesus in the midst of all of this says to them, “I am the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.....Don’t be afraid.” I was privileged to be raised on the mission field in Africa. They were African Christians whose lives were impeccable, exemplary and who made an indelible impression on my life. They were devoted people, who loved God and were faithful to Him. There was one such man who was a dedicated pastor of one of the churches in Swaziland near the Mocambique border. He lived about 15 miles from the mission station where I was raised as a teenager. He was a humble timid man. Nehemiah was his name. He was a unassuming, committed and a conscientious shepherd of his flock. One day there was knock on the door of our house and there stood Nehemiah. He looked frightened and little uneasy. He asked to see my father who happened to be 1300 miles south in the city of Cape Town preaching at a holiness convention. I was in my late teens and asked if I could be of help. He told this story. There was serious drought in the area. There was very little water. The cattle were dying. The crops were burning up. Some of the people in the area were blaming him for the drought. It so happened that the witch doctor in that community who under Swazi law, was illegally trying to make rain by various rituals. In that nation, only the queen mother (the mother of the king) was allowed to do this. Nehemiah had reached out to this witchdoctor

and as a result she had found the Lord. And then the dreadful drought began. The people believed it was because the witch doctor had become a Christian. They blamed Nehemiah and the church. Some time before Nehemiah came to talk to us, his family were preparing to retire for the night when there was a knock on the door. A tall Swazi warrior stood towering above him. As Nehemiah looked past him, he noted that the house was surrounded by more warriors with their shields and spears. They had killed his donkey which he used to plough his fields. He was then told that if he did not close the church they would ambush and beat any members who came to church on Sunday morning. This terrified Nehemiah, for he was naturally a timid man. As the story goes Sunday came round and the question was, "what was he to do?" He knew the danger and so did his people. It was his custom to ring the church bell on Sunday mornings. Though plagued by fear, Nehemiah, that timid little man, made his way down the pathway and took hold of the rope connected to the bell and rang it vigorously, and soon from across the hills surrounding the church the people came and gathered in that simple sanctuary for a wonderful time of worship. There was no doubt fear; courage does not mean lack of fear. It means recognizing the fear grabbing by the throat, controlling it and acting in spite of it. Nehemiah knew that the Head of church, the Lord Jesus Christ had commissioned him to preach the gospel and had commanded him not to fear for he promised to be with him to the end of the age. The command of Jesus was to be fearless. Furthermore there is the command to,

b. Faithfulness. Revelation 2:10. Jesus said "be faithful even to the point of death." The word faithful or faithfulness keeps getting our attention in the New Testament. It ranks high in the vocabulary of God for God places high priority on this attribute. John Stott sheds some interesting light on the word faithful. "Faith and faithfulness come from the same word in the Greek" This is understandable because it is from faith that faithfulness springs. Trust in Christ, and we shall ourselves be trustworthy. Rely on Christ, and we shall be reliable. Depend on Christ and we shall be dependable. Have faith in Christ and we shall be faithful. – Faithful if necessary unto death. The way to lose fear is to gain faith." Polycarp one of the early church fathers refused to worship Caesar and in doing so renounce Christ. If he didn't renounce Him, he knew that he would burn at the stake. But Polycarp refused to worship a man, even if he was a Caesar. This is what he said to the Proconsul, "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He has done me no wrong; how then can I blaspheme my King who saved me." He then prayed "I thank thee that thou hast thought me worthy, this day and this hour, to share the cup of thy Christ among the number of thy witnesses!" The fire was kindled, but the wind drove the flames away from him and prolonged his agony, a soldier's sword put an end to his misery." Polycarp was faithful to point

of death. We do not talk much about suffering these days. The western mind is in no mood to appreciate a church like Smyrna. It is not a popular subject in the contemporary Christian church. The church growth people appear to carefully avoid discussing it. There is nothing that cuts down the numbers down like the promise of suffering. Yet down through the ages it has been part of the life of the church. The message of the gospel has been handed down to us with the mark and the stain of the martyr's blood on it. **Let us not deceive ourselves into thinking that we are immune from the possibility of it happening in our country.** The way world events are developing today much of our society is becoming antichristian. The persecution of Christian is already happening to a certain extent in our country. In many parts of the world today at this moment, Christian's are being tortured and are dying for their faith. At the moment in the western world it does not cost much to be Christian. There are signs that it is changing. It is still true as Vance Havner the Baptist preacher wrote "we sing about the reproach of the cross and hurry home to a big dinner and TV. What have we given up for Christ? Besides, everything is measured in terms of success and prosperity these days." He goes on "I am often amused and amazed at the way we equate Christianity with success, popularity and prosperity. Many look for this in the church and if they are not pleased they move to greener pastures. We may not admit it but we use the same old gauge the world uses, except we employ religious language. The saints at Smyrna had not been given a pep-talk on 'How to win friends and influence people.'" They had no testimony on "How Faith made me Mayor of Smyrna." They were not promised deliverance from tribulation, poverty and reviling. In fact they were told that the worst was yet to come. Death lay ahead, martyrdom, as with Polycarp, who died sealing his testimony with his own life." We do not see this in our society and reports of it from other parts of the world seem so far away to be real. Some have immunized themselves from its horror, nevertheless in other parts of the world, Christians know what the church at Smyrna endured. Jesus had a clear message for them, "Be faithful (Havner p.33-35.) Finally note,

3. CHRIST'S WORD OF COMFORT. Revelation 2:10-11.

There are two powerful statements that come from the lips of Jesus that were designed to give strength and comfort. In verse 10 He says, "Be faithful, even to the point of death and I will give you a crown of life." And then in verse 11 He says, "He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death." Jesus comforts His church by confirming that if they remain faithful to Him there is a glorious and eternity full of joy and hope ahead of them. First he informs them,

a. What will not happen to them. Revelation 2:11. “He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.” Jesus promises the certainty of life to come if they remain victorious. They will not be hurt by the second death. The word “NOT” is an emphatic double negative.” wrote Morris. The victorious Christian will definitely and most certainly not be harmed by the second death at all. The first death refers to the expiration of our bodies. This death comes to all for Paul says our bodies are wasting away. There is no avoiding the first death. But Jesus talks about the second death. There is a death after death. It is a living eternal death. John in Revelation 20:14 explains what the second death means. “The lake of fire is the second death.” It is not oblivion, it is not soul sleep and it is not eternal unconsciousness it is an eternal conscious eternal perpetual agonizing death. The unrepentant wicked will be placed there. John in Revelation 21:8 “their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.” There is a greater catastrophe than physical death. The message of Jesus confirms that if the victorious Christian at Smyrna dies a martyr’s death for Christ, he will escape eternal anguish and eternal death. The physical death is not a great catastrophe. Jesus pointed out in Matthew 10:28, “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather be afraid of the One who can destroy both body and soul in hell.” Jesus stands in His church at Smyrna and comforts her with the confirmation that if they are faithful and victorious they will experience the first death, which comes to all, but will not be hurt by the second death. The Jesus informs them of,

b. What will happen to them. Revelation 2:10. “Be faithful even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.” This is the word of the living Christ and so it is,

i. A Powerful Word. Revelation 2:10. “I will give you the crown of life.” The one who is eternal- the First and the Last who died and came to life again – The one who with irresistible authority pushed aside the vain attempts to imprison Him in a tomb - This Risen Lord says “Be faithful and I will give the crown of life.” Here is w a word of power. It is also

ii. A Conditional Word. Revelation 2:10. “Be faithful.....” The element of **faithfulness ranks high in the priorities of God for His children. This ingredient of Christian conduct is essential to receiving the Crown of Life.** Jesus talked about two qualities that the final judge highlights when the Christian appears before Him . They are Goodness and Faithfulness. “Well done you good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Lord.” Success, prosperity or

high position is not mentioned. The great deeds are not brought to the foreground. Even martyrdom is not listed. Great skills and talents appear to be forgotten. It is not that these qualities are unimportant. Mysteriously there are two qualities that that God commends in His child on at the last day. Well done you “good and faithful servant.” Goodness and faithfulness. They are probably not a high priority in our thinking. But they are foremost in the mind of God. Surely then as we prepare hearts for heaven, had we not better look carefully at these two qualities. The initial profession of faith by itself does not do it. To rest on a past a decision or acceptance of Christ, and simply leave it there and then live life according to our desires and ambitions will not save us. Because we are part of the evangelical crowd will not redeem us. Jesus said that Goodness and faithfulness are what God notices. While it is true that there is a small truly faithful remnant in the church, the element of faithfulness is lacking in much of the evangelical movement. It certainly is not riding high in the proclamation of the full gospel these days. It seems the church has lowered the bar of commitment to Christ in much of the contemporary church scene. There is a low grade of Christianity in certain segments of the western church. So many have the idea that they can neglect the means of grace, worship hour, prayer meetings, bible studies, private and intercessory prayer, witnessing and service in the Kingdom of God, and expect to sail through the gates of heaven with the greatest of ease. This is one of the great modern deceptions that the evil one has brought into the church in these last days. One idea floating around the ecclesiastical scene is that just because one day in the past we made a profession of faith, we will always be saved regardless of our lack of faithfulness to Christ and His church. As one lady said to me quite confidently some years ago “As long as my heart is right I don’t have to go to church every Sunday.” I thought of those devout people across the seas in one church who would walk for six to seven hours to be in church on Sunday morning because they were faithful God. The truth is that if our heart is right church is where we will be. I wonder how long some evangelicals think that they can get away this and make it to heaven. The evangelical faith does not liberate us from faithfulness to the means of grace that God has provided for us in His church. The word of God does not support this mind set. **In case of misunderstanding this is not to say we gain or merit heaven by committing ourselves to these activities, but surely our commitment to these activities is the fruit of repentance and the result of grace working in our lives. It is the spirit of faithfulness which is one of the evidences of the experience of God’s grace working in our and through our lives.** Faithfulness to God and His Kingdom is what we are talking about. It also means committing ourselves to the visible church no matter how imperfect we think it is. **It is born again children of God who are the authentic church of Jesus Christ.** Even in its imperfections, it is still God’s channel of grace in our

world. He has decided that it be so. It is still the instrument of light and salt on this planet. It should be the channel of His power and blessing in our society. It is time for many professing evangelical Christians to wake up and set aside their excuses and prioritize their values to worship God and serving in His Kingdom. There is a wonderful freedom in the evangelical gospel, but it is not freedom from faithfulness to the discipline our responsibilities values and abilities in order to worship and serve God. Why am I so concerned about this? I will tell you why, because when we stand before God one day are we going to hear Him say, “Well done you good and faithful servant enter into the joy of your Lord” or are we going standing His presence ashamed and condemned. Faithfulness is a part of the condition entering into the joy of eternal life. Jesus said to the church at Smyrna “Be faithful and I will give you the crown of life.” The word of Jesus is also is

c. Personal Word. Revelation 2:10. Jesus said to the Christians at Smyrna “I will give you the crown of life.” This gift is a personal gift. **The Bible says that the “wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Eternal life is personal gift.** One summer the church I pastored Ashton under Lyne the County of Lancashire in England. We took a trip to the Welsh coast which is a beautiful part of the British Isles. I had developed a keen interest in church buildings, especially in England. It is a country rich in history. Some churches I have seen date back as far 1000 A.D. The bus stopped at a magnificent looking white marble church, in the country. I took in its beauty. I admired its elaborate stain glass windows. I was awed by its intricate craftsmanship. I was fascinated by the majestic pipe organ. It was a beautifully unique building. I was told the story of how it came to be built. It was in fact built by a wealthy lady who was nearing the end of her life. While she had everything that this life could offer, she was afraid of what lay beyond the grave. She thought that if she could build this church she be assured of eternal life. But that is not what the scriptures teach. Jesus has a personal word for us this morning that eternal life is the gift of God. If after we have surrendered to Christ, we remain faithful to him no matter what the circumstances, He says to us, as He did to the church at Smyrna ‘I will give you the crown of life.’”

Conclusion

John records what Jesus thinks of His church. The simple concluding question is “What Jesus does He think of each of us?”

