

Lesson # 5 -- The People of Jesus Christ at Smyrna.

Introduction

- A. We cannot read these letters to the churches without being struck with the loving concern the Lord Jesus has for His people.
- B. When we make a personal and practical application of these truths to our own life and family -- we understand what the writer of Psalm 139 meant when he said: Lord, you have examined me and You know me. You know everything I do, from far away You understand all my thoughts. You see me, whether I am working, or resting. You know all my actions. Even before I speak, You already know what I will say. You are all round me on every side. You protect me with Your power. Your knowledge of me is too deep -- it is beyond my understanding.
- C. It is helpful to recognize the way the Lord Jesus manifested His love for His people. He did so by enabling them to come to an understanding of the truth. This gives us a grasp on the meaning of love as well a key to spiritual progress.
- D. The Scripture: Revelation 2:8-11

I. Introduction to the Church at Smyrna.

- A. While Ephesus had more honors bestowed upon her than Smyrna -- she was recognized as being even more beautiful. Her harbour was the safest in that part of the world. The city, when John wrote, had been rebuilt according to a plan. The hills which surrounded the city were covered with lovely buildings.
- B. Smyrna was distinguished as a free city and famous for her loyalty to Rome. It was the first city to erect a temple to the goddess Roma. In A.D. 26 she was given the privilege of building a temple to the godhead of Tiberius.
- C. Because of its location and harbor, Smyrna was one of the most important trading cities in Western Asia Minor. Travellers from all parts of the world passed through her. She had a magnificent public library and a stadium in which famous games were held each year.
- D. A few years after John wrote this letter the pastor of the church at Smyrna was martyred. His name was Polycarp. He was burned at the stake on Saturday, February 23rd, in A.D. 155. It was a time when the city was crowded due to the yearly games and the stadium was filled with excited people. Someone started to shout "Death to the atheists." Before long Polycarp had been found and brought to the arena. When asked to curse the name of Jesus Christ he said: "Eighty and six years have I served Him and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"

II. The Titles of the Lord Jesus.

And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write, These things saith the first and the last, which was dead and is alive. Rev. 2:8

A. The explanation of these titles.

1. The title of the Lord Jesus -- The First and the Last -- indicates that He is in sovereign control of time and history.
 - a. Time and history are a part of His creation.
 - b. Only that which He decrees and permits can happen.
 - c. The Savior makes use of time and history to carry out His will.
 - d. The believers at Smyrna were undergoing the trials of poverty, imprisonment, and martyrdom -- they needed the comfort of knowing they were not helpless victims.
2. The title of the Lord Jesus -- Who was Dead and is Alive -- indicates that He is in sovereign control of life and death.
 - a. The Lord Jesus came to die our spiritual and physical death and thereby regain for us the life we lost through sin.
 - b. Through believing in Him the Christian has been forever set free from the penalty and power of sin and Satan our enemy.
 - c. Some of the believers at Smyrna suffered martyrdom -- but their death was not a spiritual penalty -- it was the open door to Heaven.

B. The application of these titles.

1. The two titles teach us how the sovereign control of the Lord Jesus covers every area of our life.
2. We are also reminded how He has, through His death and Resurrection, made it possible for every bad thing in our life to be turned into some form of spiritual good.
3. These truths should cure us forever of being covetous or thinking that we are some kind of a victim.

III. The Commendation of the Lord Jesus.

I know thy works; and tribulation and poverty, (but thou art rich), and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan. Rev. 2:9

A. The explanation of this commendation.

1. The reminder "I know thy works" was designed by the Lord Jesus to help these believers to "practice His presence." He knew what they were going through because He was with them and He had complete understanding of their need -- as well as their thoughts, words, and actions.
2. The words "tribulation, poverty, and blasphemy" indicate the character of the trials through which these believers were passing. All three were due to the work of the non-Christians who were motivated by Satan.
 - a. "Tribulation" indicates the trials caused by non-believers refusing to give them jobs, or to sell to them, or to rent to them, or perhaps constantly raising the rent.
 - b. "Poverty" suggests the result of such tribulation.
 - c. "Blasphemy" points out the way the non-Christians spoke against them. In this period of time the Christians were called "atheists" because they did not worship the Roman gods and were accused of being cannibalistic and immoral in that they met for a "love feast" in which they "ate the body and drank the blood of the Lord Jesus."
 - d. The words "But thou art rich" were written to remind the Christians of their wealth of every kind. They had more than money in the Savior's promise, more than security in His presence, more than power in His gift of prayer, and more than social acceptance in His redeeming grace.
3. The reference to non-Christian Jews, who had gathered together under the instigation of Satan to persecute the believers in Smyrna, was given to remind them that they were not a part of the sinful world system. Satan was against them because they belonged to the Lord Jesus and loved Him. The favorite work of the enemy is also described here -- he makes use of people.

B. The application of this commendation.

1. The reference of the Lord Jesus to the "works" and "riches" of these believers, plus the lack of an admonition in this letter, points to the truth that they were responding correctly in their trials. We can learn a good deal from such an example.
2. Too often we tend to believe that if we are pleasing God and living by faith -- we will not have trials. This leads us to a very erroneous idea of the Christian life. The acceptance of such error will cause us to think that God is not faithful to His Word, it will disturb every area of our walk with God, and it will eventually make us a bitter and critical Christian.
3. We must remind ourselves that the problems in life are due to the fall of man. We have turned the Garden of Eden with its love and peace into this jungle we call earth, with its hatred and dissension.
4. In His lovingkindness God permits trials to come into our life so He can demonstrate His greatness and goodness to us, and so we can learn to walk by faith. There is nothing more valuable that God can do for us.
5. We must believe the Bible -- trials are often the evidence of His approval (Heb. 12:5-13) -- and He wants to us grow in our ability to trust Him and cooperate with Him. What the Lord Jesus said to the Apostle Paul, in his life-long trial, he says to each of us, "My grace is sufficient for you."
II Cor. 12:9

IV. The Counsel of the Lord Jesus.

Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer. Behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried, and ye shall have tribulation ten days. Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches. He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.
Rev. 2:10,11

A. The explanation of this counsel.

1. The comforting instruction: "Fear none of those things . . . "

The reason the Lord Jesus could say this had to do with Who He is -- as revealed in His titles. He is the sovereign Lord Who is in control of the events in history and Who has conquered sin, death, hell, and Satan. He told these believers in Smyrna of the persecution they were to endure but that they did not have to be afraid.

Some commentators believe that Polycarp was the pastor of this church at the time John wrote (about 100 A. D.). His death in the arena is usually dated about 155. We do not know how many of these believers were martyred for their faith in the Lord Jesus. Perhaps the hatred of the non-Christians, as inflamed by Satan, grew until another Christian would be killed, and then some time later another one, until they were bold enough to kill Polycarp the pastor.

Whatever happened in Smyrna, we know the Lord Jesus -- Who had lived through death for them -- was with those believers and made good His instruction to them: "Fear none of those things."

We have a tendency to recoil from the thought of a friend or relative going to prison or being killed for his testimony. However, when we think back in our life, we must ask if this is really what we want. Do we want parents and children that we never heard pray or testify -- or would it be better to have parents and children who were persecuted for their faith?

2. The promise.

Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life . . . He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death. Rev. 2:10,11

In Smyrna the crown was often worn by the non-Christian. It was a reward given to the winner in the games that were played out in their stadium. A similar crown was also worn by those who would go to the temples as a token that they honored their god.

The crown the Lord Jesus promised to these believers is the crown of (which consists of) life. He is speaking of eternal life -- the gift He has given to all those that believe upon Him (John 10:28). This passage reminds us that every true believer will be faithful and will receive, not a garland of flowers and leaves, but that which is of the highest value and which will endure forever -- spiritual life.

The reference to the "second death" is found in two other passages in this book (20:14,21:8). It has reference to the judgment of the non-Christian, the eternal state in which he will be forever separated from the presence of God and every good, to live forever under the judgment of his sin.

B. The application of this counsel.

In this passage the Lord Jesus exhorted the Christians to be faithful to Him. He reminded them, by reference to the crown, that they were not in a game -- but in life itself.

We must give heed to these words. Nothing is more important than our walk with God. We have the ability to choose how we will respond in trials. We have the infinite strength and wisdom of the Lord Jesus to draw upon. We will not fail in the will of God.