

BE FAITHFUL IN THE FACE OF TRIAL

2⁸To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: This is what [the one who is] the First and the Last, the one who died and came back to life, says: ⁹I know your tribulation and your poverty, (but you are rich,) and the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews, but they are not; rather, they are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰Do not fear the things you are about to suffer. Listen; the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, in order that you may be tested, and you will suffer tribulation for ten days. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be harmed by the second death. (Rev. 2:8-11)

Introduction

Patricia was serving as a missionary in the Sudan at the time when war refugees flooded into that country. She met people who had suffered terribly and lost everything, yet those among them who were Christians still gave thanks to God.

One night Patricia stood in a crowded little Sudanese church listening to those uprooted believers singing joyfully. Suddenly a life-changing insight burned its way into her mind: She realized that God does not always lift His people out of the situation; He Himself comes into the situation ... He does not immediately pluck them out of the darkness; He becomes the Light in the darkness. (*Our Daily Bread*, 8/19/97)

Patricia had come to grasp a very significant spiritual truth: The Lord does not necessarily exempt His people from tribulation; many times He requires us to endure such times. We do well to take note of the Apostle Paul's counsel to the churches of Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch; he exhorted them to "*continue in the faith and [taught] that we must enter into the kingdom of God through many tribulations*" (Acts 14:22.)

This was the present experience of the church at Smyrna, to whom the Lord Jesus addressed the second letter of the Revelation. The message to that church of the first century and to us as Christians today is the same: Be faithful to Christ in the midst of trials, because that is our Lord's command.

I. Be Faithful in the Midst of Trial, ...With the Assurance that the Lord Knows Your Situation

Our Lord Jesus authoritatively declares, "*I know*" (vs. 9)—He is intimately acquainted with the life and situation of His church and of each one of His people. He knows that Smyrna was one of the first cities to whole-heartedly embrace emperor worship—it was so zealous for the imperial Roman cult that it won the "honor" of erecting a temple to the emperor. Our Lord also knew that there was

present in Smyrna a large Jewish population that was hostile to the Christian church. To be loyal to Christ in Smyrna was not easy, it was very hard and costly.

Thus, the Lord Jesus declares, *"I know your tribulation and your poverty"* (vs. 9.) The Greek word (θλιψις) translated, *"tribulation,"* literally means, "a crushing weight," or, "an extreme pressure." In John 16:21 the word is used to describe a woman's labor pains. In the New Testament the word is most frequently used to describe persecution and opposition suffered for the sake of Christ. The *"poverty"* of which the Lord speaks is literally, "destitution," the most extreme form of poverty. Apparently the church suffered economic discrimination resulting in severe financial hardship, leaving them destitute—all because of their allegiance to Christ.

The Lord Jesus knows their destitution, but He also reminds His church, *"you are rich."* He is reminding them of the spiritual and eternal riches they possess in Him:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms in Christ. (Eph. 1:3)

Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. ¹⁸I consider that our present sufferings are not worthy to be compared with the glory that will be revealed in us. (Rom. 8:17-18)

The Lord Jesus further assures His church that He knows *"the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews"* (vs. 9.) The Jewish community of Smyrna blasphemed the name of Jesus, (blasphemy is here used in the sense of speaking against Christ and denying that He is the Messiah.) The Jewish community at Smyrna rejected their Messiah. This was no doubt partly due to their misplaced confidence: they wrongly assumed that mere physical descent from Abraham and their cultural identification with Old Testament Israel was sufficient to make them children of God. But their rejection of Christ and His church may have also been due to a desire to avoid incurring the wrath of the Roman authorities: the Jews had a special exemption from emperor worship, if they identified themselves with the Christian church they might lose their exemption. The Lord Jesus identifies this Jewish community as being *"a synagogue of Satan,"* a charge similar to that with which He confronted them during the days of His earthly ministry. Addressing the unbelieving Jews, Jesus declared,

If God were your Father, you would love me; because I came forth and have come from God. I have not come on my own initiative, he sent me ... ⁴⁴You belong to [your] father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and is not established in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he is speaking in accordance with his own [nature], because he is a liar and the father of lies. ⁴⁵Because I am speaking the truth, you do not believe me. ⁴⁶Which one of you

*can convict me of sin? If I am speaking the truth, why do you not believe me?
47The one who belongs to God receives the words of God. The reason you do not
receive my words is because you do not belong to God. (Jn. 8:42,44-47)*

Let us be faithful in the midst of trial, with the assurance that the Lord knows our situation. When the Lord Jesus says, *"I know,"* He is not merely speaking of an intellectual knowledge of the situation, He is speaking about a personal experience with the lives of His people. When the Lord Jesus confronted Saul, the persecutor of the Christian church, He asked Saul the question, *"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"* (Acts 9:4) Referring to the Lord Jesus, the writer of Hebrews exhorts the suffering church with the words, *"Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart"* (Heb. 12:3.) Again, he gives the following word of comfort to Christians who were suffering because of their allegiance to Christ in a hostile environment; *"Since he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted"* (Heb. 2:18.) The same word that the Lord Jesus uses to describe the church's extreme poverty (πτωχεία) is applied to Jesus Himself in 2 Corinthians 8:9, *"you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty [πτωχεία] you might become rich."*

II. Be Faithful in the Midst of Trial, ...With Confidence, Instead of Fearfulness

The Lord Jesus not only assures His church that He knows their situation, He also reveals what lies in store for them in the immediate future: *"the devil is about to throw some of you into prison"* (vs. 10.) That is to say, in the near future there was going to be a government reprisal against the church. The civil authorities would take legal action against the Christian community, *"throwing some of you into prison."* But the real force behind this government oppression is the devil: *"the devil is about to throw some of you into prison."*

Scripture teaches that government has been ordained by God to be His servant:

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God ...⁴ ... he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. (Rom. 13:1,4)

But when government denies God and defies Him, it becomes a servant of the devil—exercising horrible tyranny over its subjects, and often times persecuting the church of Jesus Christ.

To encourage and fortify the church, the Lord Jesus goes on to reveal the purpose and the duration of this demonic assault. He informs them that some of their number will be thrown into prison, *"in order that you may be tested."* At times the Lord subjects His people to severe periods of trial, even employing the devil as His instrument and servant. He may do so in order to prove, or, verify, our loyalty to Him, as was the case of His leading the children of Israel through the wilderness on their journey to the Promised Land of Canaan:

You shall remember all the way in which Jehovah your God led you in the wilderness for these forty years, [he led you in this way] so that he might humble you, in order to test you, so that he might know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. (Deut. 8:2)

At other times the Lord subjects His people to trials in order to purify our hearts from sin. This was the experience of the Psalmist:

Before I was afflicted I went astray; but now I observe your word ... ⁷¹It is good for me that I have been afflicted; so that I may learn your statutes ... ⁷⁵I know, O Jehovah, that your judgments are righteous, and that in faithfulness you have afflicted me. (Psl. 119:67,71,75)

Yet another reason for which the Lord may subject His people to trials is in order to prune us for greater fruitfulness. Jesus speaks of this in John 15:1-2, *"I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener. ²He removes every branch in me that does not bear fruit. But he prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it may bear more fruit."*

The Lord declares that His church in Smyrna *"will suffer tribulation for ten days"* (vs. 10b.) This coming period of tribulation is of a relatively brief time, *"ten days."* The Apostle Paul reminds us that, in the light of eternity, all our earthly afflictions are for only of a relatively brief time, *"our light and momentary afflictions are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all"* (2 Cor. 4:17.) By informing the church that their impending tribulation will be *"for ten days,"* the Lord Jesus is assuring them that it will be for a limited, specified time—it is not indefinite, it will be terminated when it has finished its divinely-intended purpose.

Having revealed to His church what they are about to encounter, the Lord issues following commands: *"Do not fear the things you are about to suffer."* Consider the word of comfort the LORD provides for His people when we encounter trial:

Do not be afraid, for I am with you. Do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you; surely, I will help you; surely, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. ¹¹Listen! All those who rage against you will be brought to shame and disgrace; those who oppose you will be as nothing and will perish. (Isa. 41:10-11)

Consider, too, the word of challenge the LORD issues to His people when we encounter trial:

I, I am the one who comforts you. Who [do you think] you are—you who are afraid of [mortal] man who shall die, [afraid of] a son of man who is made like a blade of grass? ¹³You have forgotten Jehovah your Maker, the one who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth. [Why do] you live in constant fear every day because of the fury of the oppressor as he aims to destroy [you]? [But] what has become of the fury of the oppressor? ¹⁴The cowering prisoners will soon be set free; they will not die in the dungeon, nor will they go hungry; ¹⁵because I am Jehovah your God, the one who churns up the sea so that its waves roar—Jehovah of hosts is my name. (Isa. 51:12-15)

The Lord Jesus further commands the church in Smyrna, "*Be faithful unto death.*" Throughout the New Testament our Lord Jesus Christ makes clear to us His demand for absolute faithfulness:

Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; ³⁸and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. (Matt. 10:37-38)

In making this demand the Lord Jesus is asking nothing more than what He Himself has willingly done for us. At the time He instituted the Lord's Supper, Jesus, looking toward His death on the cross, declared, "*This is [i.e.; "represents"] my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins*" (Matt. 26:28.) Furthermore, He provides us His grace to enable us to comply with His demand. The Lord declared to the Apostle Paul in the midst of his trial: "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*" (2 Cor. 12:9.)

Let us be faithful in the midst of trial, with confidence, instead of fearfulness. Let us remember that the Lord Jesus identifies Himself to the church in Smyrna and to us as "*the First and the Last*" (vs. 8.) That is to say, He is the LORD—Jehovah Himself; note Isaiah 44:6, "*This is what Jehovah declares—[the one who is] the King of Israel and his Redeemer, Jehovah of hosts: I am the first and I am the last; there is no [other] God besides me.*" The Lord Jesus is the One who is worthy of our supreme worship and devotion, the One who is our faithful covenant God.

Then, too, He identifies Himself as "*the one who died and came back to life*" (vs. 8.) He is the Conqueror of death; He entered into death and came back to life, He is the Lord of life:

But now [the fact is] Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep [in death]. ²¹Since death came through a man, the

resurrection of the dead also comes through a man. ²²Just as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. ²³But each in his own turn: the first fruits, [which is] Christ; then those who belong to Christ when he appears [in glory]. (1 Cor. 15:20-23)

III. Be Faithful in the Midst of Trial, ...With the Knowledge that the Lord will Richly Reward You

Together with His command, *“Be faithful unto death,”* our Lord Jesus issues the promise, *“I will give you the crown of life”* (vs. 10b.) *“The crown”* (στεφάνος) here is the victor’s wreath (not the kingly crown.) It is the crown awarded to the victors in the Olympic games—this is the crown that is awarded to those who persevere and triumph by grace: *“Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown [στεφάνος] of life that God has promised to those who love him”* (Jas. 1:12.) This crown is identified as *“the crown of life.”* What the Lord is teaching us is that the reward for faithfulness—faithfulness that is accomplished by grace—is sharing in the eternal life of the Son of God Himself.

Our Lord Jesus closes His epistle to the church in Smyrna with the promise: *“He who overcomes shall not be harmed by the second death”* (vs. 11b.) As we learn from Revelation 20:14, *“the second death”* is the lake of fire; it is the ultimate expression of the righteous judgment of God. But, declares our Lord Jesus, he who overcomes *“shall by no means”* be subjected to the terrors of the second death. To the contrary, what awaits the one who, by grace, overcomes is described in Revelation 21:7, *“He who overcomes shall inherit these things, and I will be his God, and he shall be my son.”*

Let us be faithful in the midst of trial, with the knowledge that the Lord will richly reward us. He shall preserve us from the righteous judgment of God, and grant us to share with Him in the very life of God.

Conclusion

The letter to the church in Smyrna confronts us with some hard biblical truths: The Lord does not necessarily exempt His people from tribulation; on the contrary, He has ordained that it should have a part in His plan for our lives. Our Lord requires us to be faithful to Him, even in the midst of severe trial and tribulation.

But this letter also offers us some tremendous promises of God: 1) the promise of being spared from the terror of the second death; and 2) the promise of receiving from the hand of Christ Himself the precious crown of life.

Solely relying upon Christ our Savior and His all-sufficient grace, let us be faithful to Him in the midst of trial—whatever that trial or tribulation may be—being sustained by His promises and His own dear presence.

