

Introduction:

Last week we heard clear instruction for the first Revelation church, the church of Ephesus, to use discernment as they listened to Bible teaching. Discernment in teaching is worked out through the outworking of our faith in Christ expressed in love. Today - the second Church of Revelation. The teaching from the Church of Smyrna. God calls us to have ears to hear with our heart and mind, to apply the teaching of *verses 8-11*. To learn of endurance in the life that leads God’s people into the promise of eternity. Faith in Christ overcomes death and promises the gift of life when Jesus comes again.

The Church of Smyrna:

Smyrna was known as an excellent harbour with flourishing trade and a beautiful city. Does that remind you of anywhere? Smyrna is identified as a church undergoing persecution. The small church of Smyrna is a church of contradiction. They are poor but they are rich! They are weak but they are strong! They are struggling but they are overcoming! From the first reading you would have to say that this small church is being commended. The church of Smyrna is being attacked but it is blameless. Smyrna as a town had sided with Rome early on. Rome rewarded Smyrna by asking her to build a Roman temple for Emperor Tiberius in 26 AD. The Romans and the Jews had long lived together. The Romans wanted the Emperor to be offered sacrifices as a god. The Jews got around this by saying they would give a sacrifice in honour of Caesar, not as a god but as a ruler. The Romans allowed this and gave the Jews an exception to their rule. They wanted peace and this deal meant the Romans and the Jews could live peacefully together. The Romans saw Christianity as an offshoot of Judaism, so they allowed the church of Smyrna to become established.

Jewish Roman Antagonism Against Christians in Smyrna:

It is the Jews who are stirring up trouble for the Christians. *Verse 9 speaks of the Jews antagonising the church in Smyrna.* The Jews said Christianity was not an offshoot but a new religion. This meant Nero had to oppose them, as they were not offering their sacrifices to him. This is the reason there are such hard words to the Jews in this passage. It is the same logic Paul used to the Romans. He noted in *Romans Chapter 2 verse 29, "No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart"*. To the Jews in Smyrna. There are some who are a Jew outwardly, because of their family line or because they are circumcised. To truly be a Jew is an inward disposition of the heart.

What is the disposition of our hearts? There can be a temptation to manipulate people according to our own hidden desire yet claiming it as righteousness. Alternately, I believe that discernment allows for Biblical diversity where truth is not compromised and love for others is not discarded.

The Devil & God Against Christians in Smyrna:

At Smyrna there is another interesting interplay between God and the Devil in this passage *in verse 10*. God is not caught off guard by what the Devil is instigating. He fully understands this is what is going to happen. The persecution at Smyrna is rightly ascribed to the Devil. It is the Devil who is the one who will throw the Christians into prison. Just as in Job, hardship is the Lord's intention but the Devil's action. God knows of the evil. He is sovereign. He is not responsible for it. This is not language we are comfortable with. Christians today do suffer for their faith. Why does the Devil do this work? To silence Christians. To keep Christians quiet. If the Devil can keep you quiet by facing opposition or persecution and in this way keep you afraid, he will do that.

The Afraid & The Suffering Against Christians in Smyrna:

Against fear and suffering there is encouragement immediately. Verse 9 says, *“I know your afflictions and your poverty”*. This is active listening. Jesus is on our side. He says, ‘I know’. The Lord sees their broken heart. He knows their fear. Jesus is not ignorant of the tears we all shed. He knows our fear. He knows our desire to be steadfast. When Jesus knows our anguish and our fear there is cause for hope. Verse 8 says *“These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again”*. HE KNOWS! He knows of your hardships before they happen. He is with you when you come through the other side. It is the resurrected Christ speaking through this suffering church. He assured the church that he understands because he has suffered, even to death on a cross. Jesus wants them to persevere. He does not minimise the suffering but tries to put it into perspective. Don’t be fearful, be faithful. Suffering isn’t removed. It must be endured.

The Two Commands for Smyrna:

Verse 10 sets out two commands. The first is *“Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer”*. Last week Ephesus grappled with the discernment of truth against the place of love. This week Smyrna captures a constant quandary of faith and doubt. The challenge of endurance yet the victory of eternity is a promise. The verses in Smyrna capture...Salvation in death and life! Affliction against poverty and richness! Slander and truth to gain for your own reward! Is God against me? We will suffer. It is a truth living in this world. Suffering does hurt but Jesus will be there. HE KNOWS! So do not fear. I think the comfort to Smyrna is much bigger than personal suffering. It encapsulates the Christians who suffer because of their faith. We don’t know a lot about that sort of persecution but we do know it happens in our world.

Be Faithful Smyrna:

There is a famous story of Polycarp. Not known as a bird and a fish, as a ‘polly’ and a ‘carp’! Rather, Polycarp was the Bishop of

Smyrna, a city on the west coast of Turkey. Polycarp is said to have known the Apostle John and to have been instructed by him in the Christian faith. He was Bishop after this letter was written. Persecution in Smyrna continued as Jesus had said it would. Polycarp was denounced to the government, arrested and tried on the charge of being a Christian. When the pro-consul urged him to save his life by cursing Christ, he replied: "Eighty-six years I have served him and he never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" The magistrate was reluctant to kill a gentle old man, but he had no choice. Polycarp was sentenced to be burned.

The second command at the end of *verse 10* is *"Be faithful"* - to the church of Smyrna and to all God's people throughout time. Do not be afraid! Be faithful in whatever suffering you find yourself in. Being faithful doesn't mean you have to grin and bear it. It doesn't mean you have to push your feelings down. To be faithful means to trust the promises of God. This is what we learnt from Polycarp. Sadly, suffering is linked to temptation. When we suffer we are tempted not to believe that God is good, he is loving, or that he is sovereign. We are tempted not to believe the Word of God. Some people shipwreck their faith because their lives have become a shipwreck.

Jesus calls us to overcome all our fears by being faithful. Those who overcome, *verse 11* says, *"will not be hurt at all by the second death"*. Courage is not a personality type. It is to be clear in the face of fear. The church of Smyrna was called to be faithful. To be clear in the face of fear is to have courage. Death is not the enemy. Death comes to us all. Heaven does not. Do not live life by avoiding death. Live so that you do not die a second death. Live so that you are given the *"Crown of Life"* (v10) Which God has promised to those who love him.

James 1:12 says it as well, *"Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him."*