

4. The persecuted church

7/4/2004

Through almost 2000 years, there have been those who have set themselves against the church and have tried to destroy it. The Roman emperor, Diocletian, set up a stone pillar on which these words were inscribed: "For having exterminated the name Christian from the earth." I wonder how he would feel if he could see the monument today. It didn't work.

There have been those who have tried to stop the work of God. Communist countries have tried. Muslim and Hindu fanatics still continuously march through their towns and drag the Christian believers out to their killing fields. One Roman leader made a coffin to symbolize his intention, in his words, to "bury the Galilean" by killing His followers. But he soon learned that he could not put Jesus in that coffin. Finally, he ended up believing in the One that he tried to destroy. Nothing and no one has ever been able to stop the church, because Jesus established it, and He said, "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

Under the name of the separation of church and state in America, the liberal media and the Supreme Court somehow convinced the American public that it is in the constitution to ignore Christianity while we allow any false other religions to be accepted. America is doing everything within her power to erase the name of Jesus from holidays, history, education and society in general. It is a city ordinance not to allow any more Christian church in San Francisco bay area. All the public events must be held Sunday morning during any Christian church service time. Wrong is encouraged, right is ridiculed in America.

Ladies and gentlemen, mark my works. Persecution against Christians in America is coming, especially if John Kerry becomes next president of the United States. I've learned that he is more liberal than Hilary Clinton or Ted Kennedy. So you can imagine how liberal he is!

A. THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH OF SMYRNA FROM JESUS

Rev. 2:8 "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:

1) Smyrna was a beautiful city.

Smyrna was a beautiful city on the western coast of Asia Minor, about 40 miles to the north of Ephesus. It claimed to be the 'Glory of Asia.' It was a center of learning and culture and a great trade city, especially in wines. Smyrna, like Ephesus, was a city of wealth and commercial greatness.

2) It was a city deeply committed to idolatry and the worship of the Roman Emperor

It was a city deeply committed to idolatry and the worship of the Roman Emperor. In 196 B.C. Smyrna built the first temple to Dea Roma - the goddess of Rome, the spiritual symbol of the Roman Empire. Once the "spirit" of Rome was worshiped, it demanded people to worship the living Emperors. This worship was connected with political allegiance and civic pride.

Smyrna became a leading city in the Roman cult of Emperor worship. All that the Christians in that city had to do was to burn that pinch of incense, say, 'Caesar is Lord,' receive their certificate, and go away and worship as they pleased. But that is

precisely what the Christians would not do. They would give no man the name of Lord. That name they would keep for Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone.

The church in Smyrna represents the period in church history from A.D. 100 to A.D. 312. The city remains as a major port and an industrial center today called Izmir in Turkey. The word "smyrna" comes from myrrh – a fragrance released only when it was crushed.

B. COMMENDATION

Rev. 2:9 "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.

1) The church at Smyrna was not having an easy time of it

The church at Smyrna was not having an easy time of it! The congregation was persecuted, because they refused to compromise and say, "Caesar is Lord." As I said before, Smyrna was an important center of the Roman imperial cult, and anyone refusing to acknowledge Caesar as Lord would certainly be excluded from any job market. This would mean unemployment and poverty. The word used here for poverty means "abject poverty, possessing absolutely nothing." In our terms, they were dirt poor.

2) Rich is what Jesus thought of them

However, this spiritual rich is what Jesus thought of them. Our estimation of ourselves is far less important than God's estimation of us.

Material riches can be an obstacle to the Kingdom of God. There is nothing wrong with having money. The trouble is that money so easily "has" us.

Often, material riches are acquired and maintained at the expense of true spiritual riches. In the glory days of the Renaissance Papacy, a man walked with the Pope and marveled at the splendors and riches of the Vatican. The Pope told him, "We no longer have to say what Peter told the lame man: 'Silver and gold have I none.'" His companion replied, "But neither can you say, 'rise up and walk.'"

3) What did it make them to be so dedicated to their Savior Jesus?

What did it make them to be so dedicated to their Savior Jesus? They were people just like us. But they were not only thinking about their comfort in present time. Rather, they were thinking about their Savior Jesus and Heaven that is unseen.

2 Corinthians 4:18 while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

4) I understand that the blasphemy against God is not only limited in cussing words

I understand that the blasphemy against God is not only limited in cussing words, but also not doing the things we are supposed to do in the name of God. But I believe that those who use God's name in vain should take a note of this verse. Because as we can see here in v9, God knows every blasphemous words and things each individual does. If you are using God's name in vain as a part of your vocabulary, stop it now.

I remember what Dallas Cowboys former coach late Tom Landry told his players when he overheard their foul mouths. He told them, "You all are college graduated. If you cannot talk like educated men, you should not open your mouth."

I would go even one step further. Whether you are educated in college or not, if you call yourself a Christian, you should not use God's name in vain, period. How can you serve your loving God and use His name in vain?

If you must use somebody's name to cuss at someone, use the names like, 'satan, buddha, Mohammed, Bill Clinton, or John Kerry..."

C. REBUKE

Rev. 2:10 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.

1) No words of accusation are given to the congregation in Smyrna

No words of accusation are given to the congregation in Smyrna! They may not have enjoyed the approval of men, but they certainly received the praise of God. I'd like to see that our Calvary Chapel of Sahuarita can be evaluated by the Lord Jesus like the church of Smyrna.

2) The Lord did give them solemn words of admonition

However, the Lord did give them solemn words of admonition as they faced increased suffering: "Do not fear." Literally, this is better translated "stop being afraid." The Christians in Smyrna suffered under persecution, and they were afraid. Sometimes we think that Christians who endure persecution are almost super-human, and we sometimes don't appreciate the depths of fear they struggle with. There were things which they were about to suffer, and Jesus wanted them ready to stand against those things.

3) Jesus didn't say that He would stop the persecution or trials

Jesus didn't say that He would stop the persecution or trials. But He told them to stay in the course even to death.

Some Christians think that living in this world with good health and prosperity is the best to do as a Christian. But from what I've learned from the Bible, I believe that the Christian life is more than wealth and health. It is about being like Jesus. If it requires being persecuted, being poor, being sick or even being killed for His name's sake, so be it. I'd rather die or go through all those things to bring glory to Him than hanging onto wealth and health on this world that would perish eventually.

4) What is the meaning of "you will have Tribulation ten days"?

What is the meaning of "you will have Tribulation ten days"? Is that the same Tribulation we are going to talk about in this Book? No, it is not 'the' seven year Tribulation. It is hardship, it is trial, it is difficult time.

Commentators on the Book of Revelation have long debated the meaning of these ten days. Some believe that it was ten Roman emperors from the years A.D. 100 through A.D. 313 were correspond to the ten days spoken of here. Because they launched such massive attacks against the believers that between five and seven million Christians were killed during their rule.

I believe that it is the normal Greek expression for a short time. However, the expression ten days is not to be taken literally.

5) Jesus told them to be faithful until death

Jesus told them to be faithful until death, then He would give them the crown of life. There are two different words for crown in the ancient Greek language. One described the kind of crown a king would wear, a crown of royalty, as known as 'diadem'. The other kind of crown - the stephanos, used here - is given as a trophy to a winning athlete. Jesus looks at the Christians of Smyrna, and says to them: "You are My winners. You deserve a trophy." The 'stephanos' was also the crown worn at marriages and special celebrations. The picture is of Jesus and His bride, each wearing their crowns.

The crown they are going to wear in heaven is not perishable like the winning athlete would wear.

1 Corinthians 9:25 And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown.

D. PROMISE

Rev. 2:11 "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."

1) When we learned about the church of Ephesus

When we learned about the church of Ephesus, Jesus promised that to him who overcomes He would give to eat from the tree of life. The tree of life that had a forbidden fruit in the garden of Eden. By eating that, the mankind have sinned against God and we are still going through the ramification of that disobedience.

But the tree on Golgotha hill two thousand years ago had changed the course of the destination of mankind from hell to heaven if individual person responds to the offer from God through Jesus.

In chapter 22 of this glorious Book Revelation, we find the tree of Life that bears twelve fruits. Again, God is providing us eternal paradise to His bride the church.

2) To those who overcome the threat of persecution

To those who overcome the threat of persecution will not face the second death in the lake of fire. Man's eternal soul has one of two eternal destinations: heaven or hell. Both are real, we will know and feel. The one who goes to heaven will know and see the presence of God and His angels without fear. But the one who ends up in hell by his or her choice of rejecting the Son of God Jesus as the Savior and Lord will be completely isolated from God and anyone. To make the matter worse, he will be burned without end. That is the second death.

3) The pastor of the church at Smyrna was a man named Polycarp

The pastor of the church at Smyrna was a man named Polycarp, the last man personally disciplined by John.

The year after Polycarp returned from Rome, a great persecution came upon the Christians of Smyrna. His congregation urged him to leave the city until the threat blew over. Before he was arrested by Rome, Polycarp had a vision of his pillow engulfed in flames. He knew what God said to him, and calmly told his companions, "I see that I must be burnt at the stake."

After his arrest, a Roman authority demanded to this aging pastor, "Take the oath and revile Christ and I'll set you free!" Polycarp answered, "How can I deny Him who has been faithful to me for eighty six years?" They finally gave up, and announced to the blood thirsty crowd the crime of the accused: "Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian."

They arranged a great pile of wood, and set up a pole in the middle. As they tied Polycarp to the pole, he prayed, "I thank You that You have graciously thought me worthy of this day and of this hour, that I may receive a portion in the number of the martyrs, in the cup of Your Christ." After he prayed and gave thanks to God, they set the wood ablaze. A great wall of flame shot up to the sky, but it never touched Polycarp. God had set a hedge of protection between him and the fire. Seeing that he would not burn, the executioner, in a furious rage, stabbed the old man with a long spear. Immediately, streams of blood gushed from his body and seemed to extinguish the fire. When this happened, witnesses say they saw a dove fly up from the smoke into heaven. At the very same moment, a church leader in Rome named Iraenus, said he heard God say to him, "Polycarp is dead." God took his servant home.

But the day of martyrs is definitely not past. All over the world, Christians face persecution, especially in Asia, Eastern Europe, and in the Muslim world. Some people estimate that more Christians, over 100,000 brothers and sisters per year, have suffered for their faith and have been martyred in the 20th Century than in all previous centuries combined.

E. APPLICATIONS

1) We may never be in a place to die a martyr's death, but we can all live a martyr's life.

But many Christians avoid persecution of any kind by conforming so much to the world that they are no longer distinctively Christians. We should not do that.

2) In our lifetime, we might face actual physical persecution against Christians in America. Would you be ready to stand up for Christ as He stood up for you in the presence of God the Father?

If not, why? What are you afraid of? Because they might kill you or hurt you?

*Matt 10:28 And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.
But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.*

It costs to be a dedicated Christian. In some places more than others. As end-time pressures increase, persecution will also increase; and God's people need to be ready. The world may call us "poor Christians," but in God's sight we are rich!