

Christ Counsels the Churches of Asia: Smyrna—What Jesus Expects

Franklin Church of Christ
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PM Worship

Introduction:

The seven churches of Asia in **Revelation 2-3** represent different approaches to dealing with Christianity in antagonist culture. We have already learned of Ephesus, the church, which despite its great work had fallen from its initial betrothal love of God. They were faithfully going through the motions, but how long could that last? They were counseled to repent and get back to the work they had initially done. Traveling down the road, the **Revelation** letter would come to the church in Smyrna. Unlike Ephesus, Jesus offered no rebuke. He offered comfort, encouragement and hope. When I first studied this letter, it almost seemed like a throw-away lesson. I briefly considered combining it with one of the other letters. However, the more I have examined it, the more struck I have been by its message.

As I have talked with people about serving the Lord, one of the most common refrains I hear is something along the lines of, "I just can't imagine God would expect me to..." This is rarely offered with any scripture to back it up. The person saying it just has an emotional reaction to whatever is being discussed. The thought is anathema to them and therefore they believe it must be equally abhorrent to God. We must remember **Isaiah 55:8-9**, however. God's ways are not our ways. Our thoughts are not God's thoughts. Today, many of us maintain a subconscious (for some it may be conscious) view that God's greatest goal for us is to be healthy, wealthy and comfortable. To many of us, it is just absurd to think God expects us to endure suffering of any kind. We are Christians. We have made a step of faith. Surely God is going to pay us back for that by making life easy. The moment things get difficult we either believe God has abandoned us or whatever we are doing that gets hard must not be required. In Jesus' letter to the church of Smyrna, we see a picture of what faithful Christian life looks like in a culture that runs militantly counter to Christianity. As we examine what Jesus said to Smyrna, we may have to pull down some of the emotional walls we erect to justify compromise with an ungodly society. Let us see what Jesus does expect and what Jesus' promise is.

Discussion:

I. Jesus expects...

A. Jesus expects us to endure tribulation.

1. As Paul taught the churches in **Acts 14:22**, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." The Christian walk is one of suffering. We suffer all the ravages of life, just as does everyone else. And we suffer more. We suffer the persecution that others offer.
2. We find it hard to imagine Jesus would expect His own special people to undergo suffering. Surely He doesn't expect me to do things that will lead to personal suffering. After all, He loves me. Yet, He loved these Christians in Smyrna and He said, "I know your tribulation." Notice what follows. He didn't say, "I have seen your tribulation and I am going to stop it." He said, "I have seen what you have suffered...Don't fear what you are about to suffer." Jesus said they had suffered and now they were going to have to suffer more.
3. Perhaps we should only consider this in the context of persecution. However, I get the idea that obeying God sometimes just leads to suffering whether it is about persecution or not. In **I Peter 2:18-20**, Peter spoke to servants, telling them to endure suffering at the hands of unreasonable masters. This was not about persecution. They were simply in a relationship that led to suffering. Obeying God meant enduring that suffering patiently.
4. I am not saying if we never suffer, we are lost. I am simply saying obeying Jesus often leads to suffering. When it does, Jesus most certainly expects us to suffer.

B. Jesus expects us to endure poverty.

1. **I Timothy 5:8** is one of the most misused and abused passages in all of Scripture. It says those who do not provide for their own are worse than unbelievers. Many Christians take this passage and run with it. Since Jesus expects us to provide for our families, He most certainly would never expect us to go without. Christians who own two cars, a house with bedrooms for every child, designer clothes, three televisions, two computers and a bass boat will justify all manner of jobs that negatively impact their service to God using **I Timothy 5:8**. They will repeatedly miss assemblies and classes. They will rarely spend time with their brethren. They continually intend to pray and read their Bibles but they just don't have the

time. And when questioned, they will call upon **1 Timothy 5:8**. In essence they say, "Certainly God doesn't expect me to be poor. Christians are supposed to be blessed people. In fact, I know I am right with God because look at all the stuff He has blessed me with."

2. But look at Smyrna. "I know your poverty (but you are rich)," Jesus said. Understand what happened here. It is true that Christianity appeals to the poor (**James 2:5-7**). However, I believe Jesus is referring to people who became poor because of their Christianity. Here is how it would often work. To work in a trade, these Roman citizens would often have to be members of guilds or unions. As part of their membership, they had to honor the god of the guild. For instance, the blacksmith guild honored Vulcan, god of the forge. Members of the guild would have to sacrifice to this false god. Christians, of course, refused. They were put out of the guild, other Romans ceased to bring them their business. We talk a lot about early Christians who were thrown to the lions. I wonder how many of them simply starved to death because they had to turn their back on their livelihood to serve God. Yet today, some Christians will fudge facts, alter numbers, manipulate figures, cheat on their taxes, repeatedly forsake assemblies and classes, refrain from developing relationships with other Christians all in the name of, "I can't imagine that Jesus would ever expect me to miss a meal." Benjamin Franklin once said, "Better to wake up hungry, than to go to sleep in debt." I think Jesus would change that, "Better to wake up hungry, than to go to sleep in sin."
 3. We live in a culture that believes we should never be denied anything. Sadly, most of our credit card statements claim we believe the same thing (mine included). It is time we wake up to the fact that Jesus expects us to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Him (**Luke 9:23**). This does not mean that in order to be Christians we have to be poor. It simply means if obeying God leads us to poverty, then Jesus most certainly expects us to be poor. Further, when we are poor because we are obeying God, we are actually rich, focused on the true riches of heaven.
- C. Jesus expects us to endure slander.
1. Jesus told Smyrna He knew "the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan." In the context of this verse, blasphemy here doesn't refer to blaspheming God, but to reviling and slandering the Smyrnan Christians. **Mark 7:22; Ephesians 4:31; Colossians 3:8** all translate this same word "slander."
 2. Those who said they were Jews but were not, does not refer to Gentiles pretending to be Jews. The Jews who really weren't most likely refers to Jews who had not obeyed the Law to its logical conclusion of obeying Jesus (cf. **Galatians 3:24**). Instead of being a synagogue of God as they might like to claim, they were actually a synagogue of Satan. These blasphemed and slandered the Christians.
 3. Just a few months ago when the preacher was shot by his wife, somebody got on TV and said essentially that churches of Christ were a fringe cult movement that maintained control of its members through various techniques. I visited a blog site frequented mostly by Christians. The consistent response was, "Oh no, what have we done wrong? Look at how all these other religious people view us. We must be doing something wrong. We need to change." No doubt if we are doing something wrong, we do need to change. However, the fact that people who do not follow God according to His scripture slander us means nothing. Many today act as if we can proclaim the truth in some way that will cause every body to simply love us. It just can't happen. It didn't happen in the Bible times and it won't happen today. They will call us narrow minded, small minded, backwoods, stuck in the 50's, antis, homophobes, misogynists and worse. They will misstate what we believe in order to make us look bad. We will endure their jokes.
 4. I am not saying that we are hellbound if no one ever slanders us. I am simply pointing that when obeying Jesus leads to slanderous attacks, then He most certainly expects us to endure them.

II. We are being tested.

- A. As we noted above, Jesus did not say, "I have seen how you have suffered and been mistreated and I am stopping it right now." He actually said, "You are about to suffer more. Don't fear. I am just testing you." As God sent the Israelites through the wilderness for 40 years to test

them and see if they would obey (**Deuteronomy 8:2**), Jesus allows us to endure tribulation, poverty and slander to test us. Will we obey Jesus even if we have to suffer? Or will we make excuses and act as though Jesus could never possibly expect us to be anything less than healthy, wealthy and comfortable?

- B. Jesus told Smyrna, "...you will have tribulation 10 days." This statement is amazing. It points out that Jesus actually has control over our suffering. He can place limits on it. He has limited it. The use of the number 10 in this apocalyptic book is a statement that the suffering will be complete, it will endure for its complete time. However, it is only 10 days. It is not 10 months or 10 years or 10 centuries. It is 10 days. This is the apocalyptic equivalent of Jesus saying, "Hang on, brethren. Your suffering will be complete. However, in the eternal scheme of things, it won't be long." We are being tested, but our test won't last long. Let us endure until the end.

III. Do not fear...

- A. Jesus' one encouragement to Smyrna was, "Do not fear what you are about to suffer..." Why not? Because, "If you are faithful until death, I will give you a crown of life." If we endure the 10 days of testing, enduring the suffering, poverty and slander with patience and faithfulness even if it leads us to death, we will receive a crown of life.
- B. Brethren, there is only one way for us to maintain this kind of faithfulness. We have to be separate from the world and the material. Sadly, we too often place a high premium on the things of this life. We want physical health. We want material goods. We want comfortable living. We want all peaceful relationships. God wants us to place a premium on spiritual health, heavenly treasures and peace with Him. We have to set our mind on the things above and not on the things of this earth (**Colossians 3:2**). We have to focus on the eternal reward and not on the temporal pleasure of health, wealth and comfort (**Hebrews 11:24-26**). We have to quit being afraid to die in the Lord (**Revelation 14:13**). We have to quit thinking that the worse thing in the world is to suffer in the world. The reality is, the glories that will be revealed to us are worth any possible suffering we might endure (**Romans 8:18**). Consider the suffering we might endure. What is the worse someone might do to us? They might beat us and kill us. But then we will be with our Lord who has promised to protect us from the second death—the lake of fire.
- C. Brothers and Sisters, I do not know what we are going to suffer in our lives. I don't know what we will suffer in our homes, on our jobs, from false brethren, from those who claim to be Christians but aren't, from the government, from our friends, from life. I know only this. If we obey the Lord even if it leads to our very death, we will receive a crown of life.

IV. Our example

- A. Read **Revelation 2:8**. Who is Jesus? He is the one who was dead and has come to life. Why is it that we cannot imagine that Jesus would expect us to suffer tribulation, poverty and slander for Him? Isn't that exactly what He endured for us? He is our great example. When we begin to think Jesus can't possibly expect us to endure ill treatment for any purpose, let us remember the scourge that lashed His back. Let us remember the crown of thorns shoved upon His head. Let us remember the pounding fists and the reed that battered His thorn crowned head. Let us remember the nails that held Him to the cross. Let us remember that He could have called 12 legions of angels to stop it all, but He didn't. He endured for us.
- B. What happened to Him? He received life after death. Jesus suffered and died for us and returned to life. If we suffer, even to the point of death, for Jesus, we will receive life. Let's face it. No matter what we do, we are going to die. It might be long and drawn out and painful. It might be quick and painless. Either way, we are all going to die. We can't avoid that death. Why do we spend so much time trying to avoid the death we cannot possibly avoid but so little working to avoid the second death we can avoid if we will only maintain faithfulness even when it means suffering? Jesus has set the example. Let us follow Him and overcome.

Conclusion:

How do we compare to Smyrna? What do we think Jesus expects? Are we willing to obey Jesus' laws for us even when they mean we will suffer tribulation, poverty and slander? How badly do we want the crown of life?