

Text: Rev. 2:8-11

Title: "The Son of Man's Local Church at Smyrna"

Time: 3/19/2017 am

Place: NBBC

Intro - The coastal city of Smyrna was a rival of Ephesus for the title "Greatest City of Asia." Early in its history, its leaders correctly anticipated the ascent of Rome to power in the region, and so in John's day Smyrna was especially proud of her historic Roman patriotism. In A.D. 26 under the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Smyrna was granted permission to build a temple for the worship of Caesar and the spirit of Rome. Smyrna was an exceptionally beautiful and prosperous city. It played host to Greek games that were celebrated in honor of pagan gods.

Members of the local church of Smyrna often felt like outsiders in this kind of a city. Swete: "On such occasions Christian citizens were doubtless placed in a position of peculiar peril, but at no season would they be regarded with favourable eyes by a population immersed in business and pleasure, devoted to the local cults, and proud of its loyalty to Rome and the Emperor" (lxi-lxii).

One of those at the assembly time of the local church of Smyrna where this letter to the church was first read may have been a young man by the name of Polycarp. He was in his teens or twenties at this time. In fact, he may have been one of the pastors of the church already at this young age. What we do know for sure is that some six decades or so later, Polycarp had an opportunity to apply its encouragement to faithfulness unto death in a very difficult way. The Lord asked Polycarp, now a man of eighty-six years of age and the senior pastor of this local church, to be faithful

unto a very difficult form of death. John Foxe tells the story of the faithful pastor of Smyrna in his Book of Martyrs:

“The proconsul asked him if he were Polycarp. When he assented, the former counselled him to deny Christ, saying, ‘Consider thyself, and have pity on thy own great age’; and many other such-like speeches which they were wont to make: --‘Swear by the fortune of Caesar’ -- ‘Repent’ -- ‘Say, “Away with the atheists.”’

“The proconsul then urged him, saying, ‘Swear, and I will release thee; --reproach Christ.’

“Polycarp answered, ‘Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never once wronged me; how then shall I blaspheme my King, who hath saved me?’”

Polycarp was burned alive at the stake by the Roman authorities of Smyrna.

All over the world today, local churches are being asked by their Lord to do what He asks the local church of Smyrna to do in this letter, and what Polycarp faithfully did for Him in response – to be faithful in the face of great persecution and suffering. Many local churches are not free to assemble the way we assemble this morning. In one sense we are going to have a hard time relating to the content of this letter because of that difference. But ultimately, whether persecuted or free, we too are called to be a local church that is faithful until death. We shall die. Will we have been faithful local church members when that happens? This is the challenge of this letter to our hearts today.

The local church of Smyrna is one of only two of the seven churches who experience no correction from their Lord, so we only have three points this morning: (1) the Son of Man’s glory in the church; (2) the Son of Man’s encouragement of the church; and (3) the Son of Man’s reward for the church.

I. The Son of Man's glory in the church (v. 8).

Ill: In our Sunday school class, we are studying in great detail the deity or godhood of Jesus Christ. One of the important evidences of this doctrine is the way the New Testament takes Old Testament passages about Jehovah/Yahweh and applies them to Christ. This verse is one of the verses we noticed together, because it takes a title we first find in Isa. 44:6 describing Jehovah/Yahweh and applies it to Jesus Christ: "Thus saith the LORD the King of Israel, and his redeemer the LORD of hosts; I am the first, and I am the last; and beside me there is no God."

Appl: So for Jesus to say that He is the First and the Last is for Him to say that He is Jehovah/Yahweh, the King of Israel, Israel's Redeemer, Jehovah/Yahweh of Hosts, and the only God of monotheism. He is the First because He made everything – it all came from Him, and He is the Last because everything was made for His pleasure and will ultimately fulfill this end – it is all going to Him. He is the ultimate past and the ultimate future, and so if our lives in the present are lived for anything other than Him, they are a complete waste. Philosophers tell us that if we know where we came from and where we are going, it can help us know why we are here. These are all related truths. We came from Christ, we are going to Christ, and we are here for Christ. We have gathered this morning to worship He who is the First and the Last, because beside Him there is no God.

Appl2: And we have gathered to do so on the Lord's Day (Rev. 1:10), Sunday, the first day of the week. The Savior's glory that makes this day our day of worship is His glorious resurrection. He became dead, but then afterwards He

lived. He arose from the dead. It is on that foundation that the Lord builds His encouragement for this suffering church. The sufferings of Christ gave way to the glory of resurrection, and ours shall too. Jesus wants this church to understand that it will be worth it all. He wants us to understand that as well. Christ is risen from the dead as He said. In the battle with sin, Satan, the world, and death, we are victorious. He has won.

Ill: When we see something truly glorious it always has an exciting effect on us. You catch a huge fish for dinner, and it is pretty exciting. There is real joy and amazement there.

Do you and I see the glory of the Son of Man in our local church worship this morning? We meet for His sake, who is the First and the Last, who became dead and arose. Worship means to attribute worth to something, and if we do not see the glory of Christ, our worship here is empty.

II. The Son of Man's encouragement of the church (vv. 9-10a).

Ill: They say there is a difference between sympathy and empathy. *To sympathize* with someone, you need to feel badly for their suffering. *To empathize* with someone, you need to have felt the suffering they feel.

My dad is going through a difficult time right now with his house. He has been told that he has very expensive water damage and a mold problem. When my sister told me what he is going through, I called him and the first thing I said was, "I hear you could use a call from a son who has had a mold problem." I wanted Dad to know that I hoped to empathize with him, that I had been through some of what he is going through now. Empathy can encourage in a way sympathy cannot.

Appl: Our Lord does more than sympathize with this local church's suffering; He empathizes with them. When He said, "I know your tribulation and poverty," He meant that He too had experienced that kind of suffering. When He said, "I know the blasphemy of those who claim to be Jews but are actually from the synagogue of Satan," He meant that He too had experienced that kind of ministry opposition. When He said that He knew how the Devil would cast some of them into prison, He meant that He too understood what it was like to be at the mercy of wicked hands driven on by this ultimate accuser of the brethren.

It is clear from the vocabulary used that the poverty experienced by this local church was an extreme form of poverty. It is instructive to me that poverty was experienced by this church in the midst of a city of great prosperity and wealth. It reminds me of our own church's finances at times, but actually I think we know very little of the suffering described here. The word translated *poverty* comes from a verb meaning *to cower*.

Ill: My dog Dixie illustrates this idea every time I am in the kitchen making a meal. She will come to the edge of the kitchen and then cower down with her head on the floor hoping that some scrap might be thrown her way. You might say that she is begging when she does that.

That pictures well the idea behind this poverty of the Smyrna church. It is beggarliness. It is desperate destitution and helplessness.

And again, it was known by our Savior in a personal way. The same word is used to describe His experience in 2 Cor. 8:9, "For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that

ye through his *poverty* might be rich." Our Lord Jesus Christ became poor, so that we can be rich through His beggarly, destitute, poverty on the cross. I think that is what He means when He encourages this poverty-stricken church with the next phrase – *but you are rich*. Jesus could see how He had blessed them with every spiritual blessing in heavenly things in Christ. He could also see the treasures they had laid up for themselves in heaven through their faithfulness. What does He see about where our treasures are laid up? Is our church rich in all the ways the Smyrna church was?

App12: But perhaps even more spectacular than His ability to empathize with the suffering of this local church is our Lord's ability to tell them exactly what to do in the midst of that suffering. I wish I could have done that for my dad and his mold problem. The Savior says to do two things in the face of extreme suffering: (1) do not fear; and (2) be faithful until death. In the face of the cruelty of Satan himself, Jesus says, "Do not fear; be faithful until death."

The Smyrna church undoubtedly found that difficult at times: "Lord, we don't have any money." – "Do not fear; be faithful." "Lord, those who oppose us are respected as Jews but are actually the synagogue of Satan." – "Do not fear; be faithful." "Lord, the devil himself is going to cast some of us into prison." – "Do not fear; be faithful."

I think our temptations to fearfulness and faithlessness are far less to face than those in Smyrna. "Lord, there are many other things we want to buy with our money." "Lord, people will lose respect for me if they know I am a part of this church." "Lord, it snowed again." Still, the Lord says, "Do not fear; be faithful until death."

If our brothers and sisters in the local church of Smyrna could be courageous and faithful, what right do we have to allow our lesser difficulties to make us fearful and faithless? The Son of Man's encouragement to this church is a great word of correction to us, because far less than what they experienced causes us to fear and to be unfaithful far too often. We need to repent of that fear and faithlessness.

III. The Son of Man's reward for the church (vv. 10b-11).

Appl: It is interesting that a reward is mentioned in verse 10 that precedes the formula, "Let him that has ears to hear" in verse 11. "Be faithful until death, and I shall give you the crown of life." It would seem that this reward is available to the local church members of Smyrna in a way it is not available to everyone else that has ears to hear.

The crown mentioned is the *stephanos*, a garland that was worn by the Caesars of that day to indicate not only that they were the ruling authority, but also that they were the conquering victor. This crown and others like it in the NT symbolize the church member's rewards for spiritual victory, which include the privilege of ruling and reigning with Jesus in the coming kingdom. Local church faithfulness has its cost, but it will also have its reward. The cost is the temporary sacrifice and suffering of this present time required to be part of a local church; the reward is the eternal glory and privilege of ruling with Christ in His kingdom. And all we need is faithfulness. This simple formula is the essence of rewarded ministry – faithfulness unto death.

Appl2: But perhaps even more important is the reward we find in the final verse of the letter – "The one who overcomes shall not be harmed by the second death." This every ear needs to hear. In Revelation 20 we learn what Jesus

means by *the second death*. He means the eternal lake of fire prepared for the devil and his angels. We must overcome to not go there, and overcoming means to place faith in the Overcomer, Jesus Christ, who died, but then lived.

Conclusion: “Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?” (1 John 5:5). Do you believe on Him? Will your faith in Him overcome?

“A man came – I think it was actually in Philadelphia – on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction – the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

– David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching