

What Christ Expects of His Church

III The Letter to Church at Smyrna: Suffering

Revelation 2:8-11

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In an effort to discern what Jesus Christ expects of those who are called by his name, we are reflecting together on John's vision of the risen and reigning Christ found in the first three chapters of the book of Revelation. In this vision Jesus directs John to send letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor. And I am suggesting that these letters provide us with clues and insights that are invaluable for any of us and any church that is intent on pleasing Christ more than we are on pleasing any individual, organization or group that has its own expectations of and preferred agenda for the church of Christ today.

If you consult a map of the Roman province of Asia from late in the first century AD you will see how these letters have begun to make a circuit, being sent from the island of Patmos first to the nearest and most prominent city of Ephesus, (modern day Kusadasi) the metropolis of Asia. We're now beginning to move up to Smyrna and Pergamum and we will follow the old Roman road connecting Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. The likelihood is that, like our church today, these churches are hearing Christ's message to all of the churches, not just the specific message to them. Like us, they have the advantage of a larger view and surely what Christ expected of one he also expected of the other.

In the first letter we learned that the first expectation Christ has for his followers, and I would argue that this is not only the first in sequence but the first in importance as well, is that they be prepared to love, to love God and others with a thrilling and passionate exuberance. The Ephesian church may have excelled in both orthodoxy and orthopraxy. That is to say, they believed all the right things and they worked hard and tirelessly in doing the right things. Their lone failing which Jesus points out was that they had forsaken their first love. And yet, as the Apostle Paul reminded the Corinthians, we may have all manner of spiritual gifts and personal virtues but apart from love, they amount to nothing. "So, make love your aim," (1 Corinthians 14:1) Paul suggests. And I believe that, like John, Paul learned this lesson from the risen Christ. More followers of Jesus in our day need to see this same vision and need to hear again our Lord's directive that we are to love above all else. We are to love like we did at first and nurture that love day in and day out.

Now none of you complained very much about our Lord's first injunction to love. Who, after all, can be opposed to love? Of course, those followers of Jesus who are uncomfortable with the emotional element of the faith and prefer to focus on doctrinal precision or ethical purity may have felt that their positions were slighted somehow. Then again, they know that we also have six letters remaining and their day may come.

But if the letter to Ephesus on the importance of love did not bother you, our next letter directed to Smyrna may disturb you greatly. Let us listen now for the word of God: (Read Revelation 2:8-11)

If in the first letter to Ephesus Jesus advised his church to be prepared to love fervently, then this second letter is telling us that as disciples of Christ we must also be prepared to suffer greatly. Now loving is one thing but suffering is quite another. But then again, perhaps they are not unrelated at all. One could well argue that only the person who loves passionately --- a country, a cause, a person, or even a god --- is truly prepared to suffer willingly, for it even to lay down one's life for that which he values more than life itself. John Stott has written that "a willingness to suffer proves the genuineness of love." (*What Christ Thinks of the Church*, page 41) And in the *Cost of Discipleship* Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor who died in a German concentration camp, wrote that "suffering is the badge of the true Christian."

Nevertheless, suffering is not something that appeals to us, even to the most devout among us. We avoid it if possible and embrace it only as a dreaded necessity. And so we stumble and stutter over passages like this one today that called us to worship this morning wherein Peter says that Jesus not only suffered in doing what was right but also left us an example that we might follow in his steps. No, that is not the path most of us would willingly choose to take, so what are we to make of this business of suffering and how are we to make sense of the letter to Smyrna wherein Jesus praises the church for its affliction and its poverty? He even says that more suffering is on the way and some may even be required to die for the faith. Most of us would resist such a demand or promise. And the expectation of affliction and poverty, of imprisonment and death as the cost of discipleship would probably repel rather than attract most would be followers of Jesus. Most people who join our church probably don't think they are signing up to suffer. But should they? Should we? How do we view the nature and the necessity of suffering as followers of Jesus?

I suspect that many of us, to be quite frank about it, are still back in the Old Testament when it comes to suffering. I know there are exceptions, but as a rule the Hebrew scriptures emphasize that God comes to the aid of his children, delivers them from injury and illness and pestilence, rescues them from their enemies and protects them from harm and shields them from evil. Did you listen carefully to Psalm 91 this morning? God is the protector and defender of his people, is he not? And what is more, our Hebrew forbearers often assume that since they were the chosen nation and the chosen people God would deliver them and enable them to triumph over their enemies and adversaries.

Consequently, it was often assumed by God's people that if you were suffering or ill or defeated in battle then you must somehow have deserved this and in fact you may not even be a true believer. Prosperity and health were a sign of God's favor and poverty and illness a sign of God's judgment. You remember of course how these assumptions influenced the friends of Job as he struggled to make sense of his own suffering.

Traces of this jaded perspective still exist in the church today. Not infrequently some within the church believe that it is God's business to bless and prosper and deliver them in the midst of their afflictions and if God refused to do so they consider God either impotent or

uncaring and they give up on God and their faith. But the God they are giving up is the God they have created in their own minds.

Many of us have not made it to the New Testament in our comprehension of suffering. And what we find concerns us and even frightens us. Jesus and his apostles understand that suffering is inevitable, if not necessary. Suffering is not something to avoid at all costs but may in fact be embraced and used for the glory of God and the spread of the Gospel. Jesus does make it clear that those who suffer tragedy and illness are not necessarily worse sinners than others (Luke 13:4) but he also says that in their affliction God can be glorified. Pain and suffering can be used of God in ways that bless you and others.

In Matthew 10 Jesus is giving his apostles a pep talk as he sends them out in mission to the world. He tells them that they are going to be as sheep among wolves --- not the most comforting of images! He tells them that they will be flogged, thrown into prison, and hated by all because of their allegiance to him. But not to worry, he tells them. Fear not, because their adversaries can do no more than kill them. Their soul is safe with God.

Now I love Jesus' parables and miracles and his beatitudes. His sermon on the mount is the distilled essence of truth and grace. But frankly this pep talk leaves a lot to be desired. "Be encouraged," he tells his disciples, "all they can do is torture and kill you!" But then again, the message must have worked because they all went out and they all returned intact.

At any rate, so much for the servants of God and the followers of Jesus being protected from the trials and the afflictions of life. And lest we forget, if the John who is writing these letters is the same John who was the beloved disciple of Jesus as is the traditional views, he must realize that he was the only apostle who has lived to old age and all of the others, at least according to tradition, were imprisoned, stoned to death, beheaded, or crucified. The church of Jesus Christ is not spared suffering and heartache. But then again, our suffering and the way it is borne and embraced becomes a powerful witness and it is used of God to grow the kingdom and to spread the Gospel.

Now I am not telling you this morning that suffering is necessary in the Christian life, but I am suggesting that it may be inevitable. There are some places in this world today where to be a Christian is to be so at the very risk of your life. But for most of us who take seriously the call to follow and emulate Jesus in our daily lives, we do so not at the risk of our lives but rather at the risk of our popularity, our prestige, our power, our wealth, or our comfort.

The unadulterated truth is that being Christian means being part of a counter-cultural movement ---regardless of the culture. To be sure, some cultures are more at odds with the Gospel than others. But every culture, including our own, promotes attitudes, policies and perspectives that are foreign to the Kingdom of God. No, you may not have to sacrifice your physical life if Christ is your Savior and Lord in America today, but you will have to sacrifice something and indeed you must. To worship means to ascribe ultimate worth to something. And if you ascribe ultimate worth to the God who became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth then other things have less worth and must be sacrificed. Even Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi recognized this. Christians may have their list of the seven deadly sins, but Gandhi developed a profound list

of the most spiritually dangerous traits or seven deadly social sins. And here they are: Wealth without work, pleasure without conscience, science without humanity, knowledge without character, politics without principle, commerce without morality, and worship without sacrifice.

Now if Ephesus was the most important city of Asia Minor, Smyrna may have been the loveliest. Ancient Smyrna (present day Izmir, Turkey) boasted of being “the pride of Asia.” It was beautiful, prosperous, and had the safest and most convenient land-locked harbor in that part of the world. Its beautiful buildings and majestic temples sat on a hill and were called the Crown of Smyrna. It had a highly refined culture where the arts, education, and architecture flourished. Like some other cities with which we may be familiar it was a haven of municipal vanity and presumptuous self-importance.

Smyrna was also a free city and enjoyed the favor of Rome for centuries because early on Smyrna had decided to be loyal and supportive of the Roman Emperors and their Empire when other regional powers challenged their superiority. And Rome was duly grateful. Maybe that is why Smyrna was selected as the first city in which to erect a temple to the goddess Roma, symbolizing the very spirit of Rome. Of all the cities of the province, Smyrna was chosen to create a temple to the godhead of Tiberias.

So why was the church of Smyrna so persecuted? They refused to worship the Emperor by burning incense to him at an annual festival designed to test both patriotism and orthodoxy. They refused to give obeisance to the spirit of Rome. Consequently, they were viewed as a traitorous problematic, and embarrassing minority. They were repressed and detested by the establishment politically and economically they were discriminated against. They were slandered and persecuted by both civil and religious bodies. This disturbing reference to the “Synagogue of Satan” alludes not to all Jews but to those Jews who strangely enough sided with the state and went along with the ceremonial worship of the Emperor and who also felt threatened by the growth of the Christian church which claimed to be the fulfillment of Israel.

The poverty of the Christians in Smyrna was due to several things. They were discriminated against in employment. Their own businesses were boycotted and attached and many people in the region refused to recognize or trade with them. So, the cost of loyalty to Jesus was extremely high in Smyrna and Jesus’ message to them recognizes this and praises them for their fidelity and their sacrificial discipleship.

Within the lifetime of some who first heard this letter read in Smyrna, one of the outstanding leaders in Christendom was martyred. Polycarp was the beloved Bishop of Smyrna. The public games in Smyrna at the arena had stirred the patriotic passion of the Roman citizens. Bishop Polycarp had fled at the urging of his congregation, but a shout went up to find and eliminate the atheists, meaning those who refused to recognize the divinity of Caesar. (Notice that Christians were considered the atheists.) Polycarp was sought and found but like his Lord offered no resistance to his captors and made no effort to escape. Instead he offered food and drink to his captors and asked for time to pray. They allowed him two hours.

As they made their way back to Smyrna the officer in charge urged him to go ahead and offer a sacrifice to the emperor. What harm could it do, he reasoned. He was shoved out of the

carriage upon arrival in the city and brought before the proconsul in the amphitheater who told him to “swear by the genius of Caesar... revile Christ” and then win his release. Polycarp’s confession according to tradition was as follows:

“For 86 years I have served him, and he has done me no wrong; how then can I blaspheme my king who saved me?” The proconsul threatened then to throw Polycarp to the wild beasts, but Polycarp said to go ahead and call the beasts in. Since he showed no fear of the beasts the proconsul threatened to burn him at the stake. The angry crowd, both Jews and Gentiles, gathered wood for the fire and Polycarp asked only that he not be fastened to the stake. The fires were lit and the martyr prayed: “O Lord, Almighty God, the Father of your beloved Son Jesus Christ, through whom we have come to know you...I thank you for counting me worthy this day and hour of sharing the cup of Christ among the number of your martyrs.” The fire raged but the wind blew the flames away from Polycarp, only adding to the intense heat and prolonged agony. Finally, a soldier stepped up in sympathy and put an end to his suffering by killing him with a sword.

The letter to the church in Smyrna is a letter to us today. It raises for us the question of whether or not our love of the Lord is sufficient that we are prepared to suffer if called upon to do so. Frankly, my fear is that we are not prepared. Most churches, ours included, have a difficult time getting its members to come to worship regularly, to study the scriptures faithfully, to engage in service to others willingly, and to give of their time and money sacrificially. If we can’t get the vast majority of our members to do these simple and rudimentary things that actually cost them very little but also reveal the caliber of their loyalty and the character of their love for the one they profess to be Lord, then how in the world do we expect these same people, not just to be inconvenienced, but actually to suffer personally as they follow Jesus?

Do we have the conviction and courage to challenge the spirit of America if it, like the spirit of Rome, is at odds with the spirit of God? Do we have the conviction and courage to see wealth as a resource entrusted to us by God to be used for God’s purposes and not a measure of our own status or intelligence? Do we have the conviction and courage to speak the truth to power, to live moral and ethical lives that disavow the world’s values? Do we have the conviction and courage to trust this Jesus who we claim to follow and to believe his words to Smyrna and to us that if we only hold on and refuse to surrender to the powers about us, then we too will be given the crown of life? The crown of life promised here is similar to the “tree of life” in verse 7 of the previous letter. It is simply a way of saying that in God’s eyes we will win, despite the world regarding us as losers. And in God’s time, even though we will die, yet shall we live. Do we have Smyrna’s conviction and courage which will equip us to cope with life’s afflictions and hardships? I don’t know --- do we? It all depends on whether the church today ears has to hear what the spirit is saying to the church.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.