

The Church at Smyrna: The Fearful Church (Part 2)

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[0:00] Smyrna, Smyrna the fearful church, and they're fearful, I call them fearful because of the intense persecution.

! And I think we've already covered, just about finished with the false trend in your notes. And under that, Jesus reminds them of his personal victory.

And second, Jesus reminds them of his divine knowledge, and that's kind of where we are. We've covered two points, sub points under that. Jesus reminds them of his divine knowledge.

He knows their persecution, knows all about that, knows what's going on. He has not turned a blind eye to that. He's not somehow missed it. There isn't any time in a believer's life when, no matter what it is, whether it's some point of persecution or other kinds of affliction or really anything, there isn't any time that God does not know and see what is going on.

And, I mean, he knows, you know, the very hairs of your head, he keeps count of. And he knows when a sparrow falls. I mean, he knows when a leaf falls from a tree.

[1:32] God has that kind of knowledge. So, at no time should we ever think that God has no knowledge of what's going on in our life. But also, with that, because we are his beloved, there isn't any time that we should lose sight of the fact that God cares also.

So, he knows, he considers, he knows what's going on. And when there's persecution, he also knows their poverty. I believe we covered that point last week.

And I believe we're ready for he knows their problem. Isn't that right? He knows their problem because they had a problem.

Now, to this point, it's a little difficult maybe to see why I would say there's a false trend going on here. God is kind of laying this out and moving gradually to an issue that was quite, quite important, quite dire in the church of Smyrna.

And so that's why we call this, I call this, he knows their problem. There were some things the believers at Smyrna were foolishly accepting in the church.

[2:42] Verse 9. I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

And that's an interesting verse of scripture. Quite a bit of speculation about it. But really, it's not complicated. There was blasphemy going on in the church.

I'm talking about something outside the church. I'm talking about something, you know, that was going on among the pagans or even among the Jews, the religious crowd of the day.

He's talking about something that's going on in the church. And he calls it blasphemy. And he says it's among those who say they are Jews and are not, which is a little difficult.

We'll go on a little bit here and I think I'll be able to explain that. But then this last thing he says, they are a synagogue of Satan or a church of Satan, Satan's church.

[3:47] Now, before we kind of get into that, this is kind of a paradox. Because they were suffering for the truth. We've already talked about that. Intense persecution. Suffering for the truth.

No doubt about that. And yet at the same time, this church, many of them anyway, maybe the leadership of the church, were accepting error in the church. So that's kind of a paradox.

Those two don't seem to go together. They're being intensely persecuted for their faith and they're standing for the faith, you know, under persecution. And yet they have allowed at least a faction within the church.

They've allowed some point of error or false doctrine. And they were allowing that to persist in the church without doing anything about it.

Now, what was this error? Well, based upon this phrase, those who say they are Jews and are not, we understand that the error was a mixture of Judaism and Christianity.

[4:56] Or we could put it this way, a kind of mixing of law and grace. Old Testament law, old covenant law, and new covenant grace. There was a mixing of it.

And this was an ongoing problem in the church during the first century. In fact, it became quite intense, not long really after the birth of the church.

A number of the letters in the New Testament addressed this issue. The Judaizers in the church. There, quote, Christian Jews, though I would use the word Christian loosely, because they really were not true believers.

But the idea was that in order to be a Christian, you had to be a Jew. You had to be a good Jew. You had to fulfill all the laws of the Old Testament. And I'm not just talking about the Ten Commandments.

I'm talking about all the moral code as well as the ceremonial laws and civil laws that were given strictly to the Jews. Many of them were a foreshadowing of Jesus.

[5:59] And Jesus came and completed those laws, and they then were complete and no longer in effect. And so here was a group of converts to Christianity, so to speak, who were trying to force the Old Testament code on New Testament believers.

And that's what was going on in the church at Smyrna. And, by the way, it's still going on today in churches today. Now, we don't identify it as, you know, Judaistic Christianity necessarily, but what we should identify it as is Old Testament being forced on New Testament believers.

And I don't think I put this quote in there for you, but John Phillips, I think, identified it pretty good. He said, In doctrine and in practice, the church has tolerated an alien Judaistic graft.

Now, you know, John Phillips, the way he uses words, a graft. A graft, like you would graft, you know, a certain type of plant into another.

Grafting. And the church has tolerated that. That's what was going on in Smyrna and still going on today. And then he kind of identifies what some of this looks like.

[7:25] He said, Some wish to graft in law keeping. And they're still doing that today. In order to be saved, you've got to keep the law. Or in order to keep your salvation, you must keep the law.

And there are churches and even factions within evangelical churches that are still forcing kind of moralistic law keeping as some help to grace.

Others, he said, are fascinated by ritualism and by, and here's a good word, sacerdotalism. You want me to spell that for you?

That's nothing more than just simply Old Testament priesthood brought into New Testament day. The power and work of the priesthood. Sacerdotalism of the Old Testament.

Some are trying to do that. Still others wish to deny any factual distinction between Israel and the church and seek to make one an extension of the other.

[8:27] The church today is not an extension of Israel. We're not some new Israel in the strictest sense of the word. All right, so all of that kind of comes together to define this mixture of Judaism with Christianity.

Now, Jesus called those who were behind this false doctrine the synagogue of Satan. That's pretty strong words. The synagogue of Satan.

How would you like for Jesus to call our church the synagogue of Satan? You'd be terrible with it. I can't think of anything worse than that, that could be pronounced upon a church or a certain segment within the church, and that's the idea here.

It's not the entire church of Smyrna. The entire church is not the synagogue of Satan. But there was a faction within the church that is identified by Jesus as the synagogue of Satan.

Now, this doctrine of Judaistic Christianity, Jesus says, is the work of Satan. And it always is because Satan hates grace.

[9:33] Satan hates unconditional grace alone because only God gives grace and he hates God. All right, so it's not a hard thing to figure out why Satan would be behind this kind of false doctrine or mixture of true and false doctrine in the church.

Now, where is the synagogue of Satan? Is it in some damp dungeon somewhere? You know, some medieval castle? You know, when you think of the church of Satan, you think of some really dark and awful place.

You know, some creepy house at the end of a dark alley. Maybe it's 1313 Mockingbird Lane or something like that. By the way, that was from the Munsters.

Okay. Some of you remember that. Okay. Where it's always stormy and lightning in that one house and nowhere else. No, it's not that at all.

Where is the church of Satan? It can be right here in this church. It can be. It is, I believe, wherever Satan has organized a group of people to oppose the truth.

[10:46] He's organized them within the larger body of the church. And they are organized to promote doctrinal error, whatever that error might be.

Or, really, more true to form, a mixture. It's almost always a mixture of truth and error. Now, more error than truth. But when you have a mixture of error and truth, you have error.

You don't have truth. You can't mix the two. Kind of like the National Enquirer, you know. If you've ever looked at some of the articles, there's always some little snippet of truth in the story. But it makes the whole thing false.

And usually ridiculous. Only Satan is more subtle, of course. And the way he mixes truth and error together, it's compelling. And it makes it look like it's truth.

But any mixture of truth and error is error. And that's what was going on here in the church at Smyrna. Alright, so that's number one.

[11:50] The false trend of Smyrna. Now we move to the second point. And that is the fiery trial at Smyrna. The fiery trial at Smyrna.

Now he's going to get back to the subject of persecution. Verse 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. Fiery trial.

That's what he is talking about here. And really in this verse we can see three levels of trial. Testing. Persecution.

Three levels. First one is obvious. The human level. And that's the level of suffering that's near and dear to us. The part we feel. The part we know.

[12:49] The part we see. And so on the human level. At the beginning of that verse. In fact, Jesus is saying. Like we've already mentioned. That I know of the persecution and poverty you are enduring right now.

He's already said that. I know what's going on now. I see that. But lots more is coming. Isn't that what he said? Do not fear any of those things which are about.

Which you are about to suffer. So he's pointing now to the future. You've got more of it coming.

You're about to suffer. And so literally what he's saying is.

Don't fear this. Or we might even say even more literally. He's saying don't cower under it. Or shrink back from it.

Literally the word means to shrink back from it. To shrink back from going forward in faith. Here's the idea. This suffering is coming.

[13:54] And he could say that about our church. He could say that about the church in America. I believe we are going to be seeing. Already are. But nothing like what we may see in the near future.

A persecution upon the true church in America. I believe that's coming. And so the warning. The encouragement he gives them. I think we ought to take to heart as well.

And that is it's coming. But don't fail to keep going forward in faith. Because it is coming. And even when it begins to happen.

Don't shrink back from it. Don't cower under it. Don't compromise the truth in your faith. Because of persecution. And I believe that's what he's saying to the church here.

It's going to be rough. And it's already been bad. In fact it was far worse. They had already experienced far worse persecution than any of us have.

[14:57] But now he's going to say it's going to get worse. But don't try to avoid it because of fear. Now you know I think it's alright for God's people to try every way they can.

In legitimate ways to avoid suffering. God is not telling us and commanding us to go out and look for it. And to desire it in some general sense.

We can do things to avoid it. When you know teams travel to countries overseas where Christianity is illegal. It's alright to take precautions so that you're not persecuted or suffering.

Especially those you're working with who are national. It's alright to take those precautions. But it's not alright to fear those things happening to the point that you compromise your faith.

And compromise what God has clearly called us to. You do know that the Bible promises that Christians will suffer persecution. I mean over and over again. Did I give you these verses? [16:11] Matthew 5.10. Did I spell them out for you? Yes. Alright so you can read along with me. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake. It's a blessing.

Those who are persecuted for righteousness sake. Blessed, Luke 6.22. Blessed are you when men hate you. And when they exclude you and revile you and cast out your name as evil for the Son of Man's sake.

You're blessed. John 15. If the world hates you. And actually literally that means since the world hates you.

It's written in a certain grammatical form that tells at least the Greek reader that we're talking about a condition that is understood to be true. Since the world hates you, you know that it hated me before it hated you.

Remember the word that I said to you. A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me they will also persecute you. That's a promise. Now it's not a promise in degrees.

[17:13] There's nothing said here about just what form that persecution will take. And clearly over the history of Christianity and even in a small kind of space of it even in our day.

Some Christians suffer more than others. But he says you will be persecuted. You will be. The servant is not greater than his master.

John 16.33. The things I have spoken to you that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. You will. But be of good cheer. I have overcome the world.

And we're overcomers with him since our lives are hidden with his. 2 Timothy 3.12. Yes. And all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.

Those are all clear biblical promises in a sense. They're not meant to be. They're not in the form of promises. But the implication is you can just count on this.

[18:15] This is going to happen. As believers we will suffer persecution. Someone has put it this way. It has been. It is given to every Christian to believe in Christ and to suffer for Christ.

Faith and suffering are linked together as twin Christian privileges. That's a great quote. Did I give that one to you? Yes. Well good. I'm glad I did.

I was smart that day. Alright so we're talking about the fiery trial of Smyrna. First the human level. And second the satanic level.

Verse 10. Indeed. The devil is about to throw some of you into prison. The devil personified. The devil. Not the devil himself.

But those he works through who are going to put you in prison. But it is Satan behind this. Alright. That's clear. He's the shaker and the mover.

[19:16] He's the one. So this is the satanic level. The church of course has been the object of Satan's opposition. And Satan's attacks from the very beginning.

In fact even before the church was established. He tried every way he could. Keep that from happening. And his attacks. His opposition continues on today.

And the church is under attack. Even though you may not see it. You may not recognize it. It certainly is. I think really by now in our day. Every one of us.

Have been able to see now. Maybe 10, 20 years ago it would be difficult for many believers in America to think that the church was being attacked. Maybe we would have to go back further than that.

Clearly today the church is under attack. But we are just seeing maybe the tip of the iceberg of what we might expect to see in just a few years.

[20:18] And it's under attack from without. I mean the government. Our government system. Tax exempt laws.

Under attack in the form of tax deduction laws. I think those are gradually being taken away. Of those who give to the church. At some point.

There will be no tax deduction. For charitable giving to evangelical causes. You say was that an attack? I think that would represent an attack.

Upon the church. The health insurance laws. We have yet to see. I think. And those who are in the know. Maybe they already do see. I'm kind of ignorant on the subject. But the new health insurance laws.

Can. I think will ultimately affect churches. Especially churches with larger staffs. Larger numbers of employees. And employment laws.

[21:17] There will be a day. In fact. There are always. Already some indications. In some parts of our country. Where churches are.

The pressure is upon churches. To have equal employment. To hire homosexuals. And to suffer some kind of. You know.

Recourse from the government. We do not. That's coming very shortly. I think it's already here.

Freedom of speech from the pulpit. It is already here. To preach on certain moral subjects.

Especially those that are very politically charged. Very shortly is going to be. Become. You know. A hate crime of some kind. To preach. The biblical view.

And homosexuality. Construed. Even legally. At some point. To be a hate crime. All right. I guess we could go on. I just kind of jotted in. Everything I could think of. Anti-evangelism laws. I think there'll be a day.

[22:16] Where. Like it is in. Many other countries. That are. Quote. Open to Christianity. They're not open to the point. That you can go out. And just evangelize. And. Go.

You know. On the street. And. The street. And. Go. You know. On the street corner. Preach the gospel. If you want to. Or walk through neighborhoods.

And. Knock on doors. And. Share. Share the gospel. There's coming a day. And. Even in some communities. It's already. Illegal. You can't do that.

For example. In many. Of. Those areas. In the northwest. In. Mormon. Kind of Mormon country. They do not allow.

In many of those communities. Door to door. Evangelism. Or any kind of open aggressive. Christian evangelism. So. You know. The church is under attack.

[23:11] From without. Even in America. And. Of course. From within. This is not new. False doctrine. Has. Always been. An attack. From within.

In the church. Always has been. Still is today. Apathy. Would be another. You know. Problem. That we could identify. Within the church. That's an attack.

From within. Complacency. Sin. Sin. That is. Tolerated. Within the church. Open sin. Is not dealt with. In a script. On a scriptural basis.

Is an attack. From within. This unity. Is an attack. Disunity. Within the body. Believers. Where. Where. There's. There's.

Schisms. And fractures. And. And. You know. People. At each other's. Throats. Over some. Insignificant. You know.

[24:07] You know. That. That has happened. For years. Whether it's. The color. Of the carpet. Or. You know. Whatever it may be. Some silly thing.

So. Disunity. Some other things. But. The point is. There is. A satanic. Level. Of. Persecution. The church.

And. Satan. All of these things. To some degree. Or another. And. Can tear. The church. Apart. So. The human.

Human level. This fiery. Trial. From the human. Level. The satanic. Level. The divine. Level. The divine. Level.

We could call. The ministry. Of trials. There is. A ministry. Of trials. It is. Trials. And. And. Even.

[25:02] Persecution. Are. Often. Many times. Used. By God. To. Minister. To. To. Individual.

Believers. A. Verse 10. That. Be tested. I. I. I. Submit to you. That this. Is.

The divine side. God never. Permits. Anything. To come into the life. Does not serve some purpose. Um. Or. Does not happen.

Because of a cause. That he allowed. You know. things upon ourselves, but even that is part of God's divine work in our life. But God never permits his born-again children to suffer without a cause or without a purpose. In this case, it is that you may be tested. That's what he's saying to the church at Smyrna. And you will have tribulation 10 days. Let me comment just a little bit upon that. Scholars just don't agree on what that means.

And I'm not numbering myself among them, but I have read a number of ideas all the way from the most simple idea that, you know, it's conveying the idea that this suffering is going to be on a limited time period. I mean, there's a specific parameter put on it. All right, so it could be just as simple as that, that maybe literally 10 days of tribulation, though it's a little hard to believe that, but that would

be just 10 days, but maybe just a limited duration. Another idea is that it's a reference to, on the other side of it, a thorough time of persecution. That number 10, somehow, you know, those who get, have a fixation on numbers in the Bible, I think there's some valid things we could say about numbers in the Bible that are repetitious. Number three, Trinity. Number seven, perfection. [27:12] Number six seems to be, you know, a connection to man, you know, one less than perfection. But I don't know how far you can go with all of that, but there are those who have identified 10 as a reference, in this case, as a reference to a thorough persecution, that it's going to be a thorough time of testing. Others have said that it is really prophetic of 10 waves of persecution. Remember, Smyrna is the persecuted church, prophetically, maybe speaking of the time in the life of the church, the history of the church, when they were under intense persecution, starting with Nero and going throughout all the persecuting Caesars, and some have identified maybe 10 primary waves of persecution. I'm just giving that to you because you might be interested. Chot that down. Doesn't have a whole lot of bearing on the point of the letter here, but maybe that'd be interesting to you. But the point is that God's people do need testing and proving, and our church needs that, and our church has experienced that a number of times in our history, some in recent times. And though, again, while man, you know, we kind of, are the ones who often put the monkey wrench in, God still knows all of that, and he's worked, he worked, always works all ends for his divine purposes for us. And so we can say no matter who caused it, what the situation was, though maybe some of those could have been avoided, should have been avoided if we were faithful and obedient all the time. God still works all those things, and we need it. We need to be tested. And many churches do that.

You know, we'll experience that. And they need kind of a separation of the chaff from the wheat, in a sense. You know, kind of a winnowing process that God takes the church through. I've read several years ago, I've forgotten now the pastor's name, but he's a pastor of this big mega church somewhere.

And he was just kind of sharing about, you know, their journey as a church, and when he first got there, and that they were a pretty large church then. But then he said, you know, what we had to do was grow down to a hundred so we could grow up to a thousand. And that happens. And sometimes we think that it's always a negative and a bad thing and a sign of faithlessness or some terrible wrong thing that a church would lose members, but it's not always the case. Sometimes the church needs to lose members.

Now, I'm not making any reference to our church, so don't try to make a connection here. I'm just saying in the bigger picture, God uses times of testing in order to purge, to purge a church, and purge and to accomplish a number of things. Like, for example, you know, be it unbelievers that are in the church that will not have not repented. And yet, unbelievers have become come into the church and taking places of leadership. And sometimes God will allow a church to come under intense suffering and purging, purge out unbelievers from their leadership, or be it unrepentant believers. Sometimes there will be leadership within a church or a large enough segment of a church that is kind of in control of things that are unrepentant and they need to be purged. And God will do that. Sin in the church that needs to be reprov'd. That's a purging process.

Immorality that is taking place in the church that the leadership of the church are allowing to persist. That needs to be exposed. So God brings the church under intense points of suffering, whatever it may be, so that sin or immorality can be exposed. False doctrine is another thing that needs to be corrected. And so God tests the church, proves the church, so those things can be exposed and corrected. A church can go in the wrong direction, be going in the wrong direction, and persistently going the wrong direction. And God uses a point of suffering in the church to redirect, get the church back on target. And I'm just kind of listing several possibilities, several scenarios. The point of it all is that the church needs to be tested from time to time, sometimes just to rock us out of our complacency, sometimes get serious again about our personal walk of faith, but also as our corporate walk and so forth. All right, so the false trend of Smyrna, the fiery trial of Smyrna, and then finally, one more, the final triumph. The final triumph at Smyrna. Again, verse 10, be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. A great way to draw this letter to the church of [32:52] Smyrna to a close. So no matter what the occasion, whatever it is that's happening, going on in the church, the struggles, whatever it may be, no matter what, God's never had a loss about what to do. He just never is. He's not waiting to see what we're going to do. You know, I'll just sit back and see just how things pan out here. And you know, God doesn't operate that way because

he's not having to learn anything. And God also is not waiting to see what the enemy is going to do. You know, God just, he already knows all those things. He knows what he's going to do. God has a plan and he never has to change it. And so what is that plan? I think we could identify it this way, that the church will be triumphant. That's his ultimate plan. Now that's, that might be more indicative of the collective, the ultimate plan as a whole for the church. And he's not going to fail in this. The church will be triumphant in the end. No matter how, how many of individual local bodies suffer and maybe even some fall by the wayside or, or, or whatever, ultimately the church will be triumphant and God's going to work that plan. And I think we could see here that this final triumph is twofold. That we will share Christ's cross that, that we're already experiencing.

Uh, and the church has experienced since its conception, its birth. And we will share Christ's cross. Be faithful to the, to death, unto death. Uh, he said, that's kind of interesting that Jesus begins this letter with death and he ends with death. And there's a reason for that because I think Jesus is saying, be ready to share my cross. He says, remember he's talking to a church that's under intense persecution and he's already promised that a whole lot more is coming. And so in that sense, the church of Smyrna does represent that aspect or feature of, uh, of church life or the Christian life. And that is suffering persecution. And he said, just be ready to share my cross and be ready to bear my cross.

He bore it for our sake. And so, uh, we bear it for his sake, um, because we love him. If you ever wondered, um, by the way, in your heart, in your heart, and I don't know if you ever asked this question, sometimes when I, you know, read a newsletter from BOM or read something about persecuted church, uh, Christians in other parts of the world. And of course, now, you know, I've got kind of a connection with some people in China and, um, there's definitely persecution there. Have you ever wondered to yourself, what, uh, would my faith hold up?

Uh, if, uh, if, uh, if I suddenly experienced strong, I mean, strong persecution, even the threat of, of, of, of death? Have you ever asked that question of yourself? Would I stand, uh, or would I, you know, uh, recant my faith? Have you ever wondered about that? Um, and I don't know that, um, honestly, and speaking for myself, I don't, I, I, I don't have an answer for that. I, I have hope, a hope, that I would, I would stand strong. And I have a confidence that I would, but that confidence is not in me. And yet, what I'm saying is, I don't know that I could say with all resolution that Don Coleman would not fear, would not flee, you know, try to flee, try to escape, uh, uh, even, even, uh, say some word of denial in some sense. You know what I'm talking about? I don't know that, that any of us really, uh, could answer that question, question with a strong affirmative, uh, without any doubts. But I think the answer for us ought to be this, that we must focus on living for Jesus right now. We must focus on living for him, in an uncompromised way, living for him today. And I, I submit to you, that's the only way to guarantee that you'll live for him then. Uh, that's the only guarantee we have. If you live for him today, the likelihood of you living for him in an uncompromising way, then, somewhere out there, when you may, uh, you know, face intense persecution. Live for him today, and that's the only guarantee that you'll live for him then. All right, so we share Christ's cross, and then we also share Christ's crown. And this is the ultimate triumph. A crown, uh, I would say really a crown in two, two senses.

[38:12] A crown of enduring supremacy. Because of what he said here in verse 10, be faithful unto, unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. The words, uh, the world rather, that we live in, uh, offers hate, and hurt, and pain, and agony, and persecution. I'm talking about in general, in a general sense, and we'll see, we're seeing that intensify more and more as the years go by. That's what the world promises and offers us. But Jesus offers a crown. Promises a crown, a crown that will outlast the universe. A crown, really, that will lay at his feet. Uh, uh, but it's an enduring supreme crown. Um, and then a crown of eternal security. What was that? Eternal security. Security.

Verse 11, he says, He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by a second death. Now, what does all that mean? Well, it all depends on how you define overcomers, or overcoming. That sounds very much like self-determination. It sounds very much, uh, like, uh, you know, if you can just hold on, you'll make it, you know, but that's not really the idea. The overcomers are conquerors. They're conquerors.

And overcomers are those who believe. When you believe, when you repented and put your faith in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, you were born again, you became an overcomer. Not you started a journey of overcoming, not in the big picture, not in this theological sense. You became an overcomer, a conqueror. In fact, Romans 8, 37, we're more than conquerors. What's more than a

conqueror?

Well, I don't know what that is other than someone who's already conquered. You're more than a conqueror. You're, you have conquered through him who loved us. So the overcomers are the saved by grace.

The saved by grace, not by works. All right, so those who face the fire and the foe should have the assurance. We should have the assurance that what we face is nothing compared to what we will one day have, uh, the blessings of eternal life in heaven. So whatever we face, no matter the foe, that can't compare with what we will one day experience.

[41 : 33] .