

The Church at Smyrna: The Fearful Church (Part 1)

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[0:00] What we were doing was looking at this letter to the church at Ephesus and got just a maybe I think maybe one just one more point left.

The weakness of his church. If you look back there toward the end of last week's notes, hopefully everybody has a copy of that.

And I believe we did cover this part of it. Verses 4 and 5. That's Revelation chapter 2. It says, Nevertheless, I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember, therefore, from where you have fallen, repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place unless you repent.

And so, I think we were looking at that and I mentioned how they had lost their passion. I think very clearly you see that here in this verse.

They had lost their passion. You've left your first love. And of course, that love, their first love is the Lord Jesus Christ.

[1:27] And not only their passion, but they had also lost their passion, their profession, rather. And in a sense, their profession, even though they're very, I mean, this is the representative of the early church, the first century church, the apostolic church.

But they had very quickly lost their profession. It had become meaningless. And somehow, as someone put it, the enemy, had been allowed to steal away the, quote, gold of genuine devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ in this church.

And that is indicative, I think, of even some churches today. We have to be on guard about that. I hope that doesn't describe us. Many a church, many that's existing today, has tried to replace this devotion, this love for the Lord Jesus Christ.

They've tried to replace it with busyness. You know, just get busier. And so, it may be activities and programs and, you know, certain plans that we might have and promotions for the church.

And I think I mentioned buildings and buses and budgets. And so, again, as someone has put it, they've replaced the gold of genuine devotion with the brass of busyness. And, in fact, someone has said, and I think it's really very, very true, that busyness produces barrenness.

[3:16] If our focus is just on getting busy and doing things, that we become, eventually, it can become spiritually barren. Now, it doesn't mean we stop the busyness. In fact, we have a tendency to redouble our efforts.

We kind of sense the spiritual barrenness that is setting in, and we think somehow, mistakenly, that getting busier is going to somehow make, you know, going to change that or revive a spiritual communion and devotion to the Lord.

But it just never does. In fact, you could look at that, the opposite, that barrenness produces busyness, and busyness produces barrenness.

That is, it's kind of a vicious cycle. That when you first leave or lose your first love for the Lord Jesus and move into just busyness, it produces barrenness, and that barrenness produces more busyness.

Third, and I think this is where we left off last week, I don't think I've covered number three. He knows, there are three of them here.

[4:26] He knows the faithful works of this church. He knows the fatal weakness of this church. And then third, he knows his forceful warning that he has for this church, his church.

And this comes in verses 5 through 7. Let me read it to you. I think you have it printed there in your notes, or you can look at it in your Bibles if you wish. But the letter says to the church at Ephesus, Remember, therefore, from where you have fallen, repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place unless you repent.

But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

To him who overcomes, I will give to eat from the tree of life which is in the midst of the paradise of God. Now, the Lord, and this is the good news, the Lord is not content to let any of his churches, and I'm really speaking of individual local churches, God's not content to just let a church continue in lovelessness.

And we should be glad of that. He's not content to just let us continue or let a church continue in what we might even call loveless works for him.

[5:52] This busyness that is void of any real devotion to the Lord and love for Christ. Not content. Again, so he gives three commands that if obeyed will restore any church.

And I would say this certainly applies to any individual believer as well who has fallen out of love with Jesus. So this would apply not only to, in a corporate sense, the church at large.

A church should do these three things. But the same thing applies to individual believers, of course. The first one is to remember. That's the first thing.

Remember. What does he say? Remember, therefore, from where you have fallen. All right, so that's a good first step in it. Remember. Remember is something very vitally important. Remember from where you have fallen.

Now, what is it that we should remember? The place from where we have fallen. And what place is that? Well, I think we could say Jesus. Love for Jesus.

[6:48] But I would even be more specific and say the cross. That we have fallen from the cross in our mind. Now, think of it this way.

If your love for Jesus is not what it once was or what it should be, and both would be the same, then you have lost sight of the cross. You have lost sight of Calvary and all that that means to you.

If you don't love Jesus like you should or once did, then remember the cross. Remember the Savior who went there for you and died there for you. And remember the salvation that he purchased for you there.

See what we're talking about here? Remembering our salvation in that sense. And the grace of God in salvation. We're remembering Calvary. And so, here's his forceful warning.

Remember, and then second, repent. This is pretty logical, isn't it? I guess we could have figured this out on our own probably. You remember from where you have fallen and then repent.

[7:54] Turn. And, of course, that involves a number of things. Confess all known sin. I mean, there's only one reason why we fall from or lose our love for Jesus or our love for him cools to any degree.

It's always sin. It's always sin that hasn't been dealt with. So, we confess it as we agree with God about our sin. We acknowledge that sin and then we turn back to Jesus. All right.

So, remember from where you have fallen. You've fallen from the cross. We've taken our eyes off of Jesus. Jesus and our Savior.

And then repent. And then third, resume. All right. You know, it's just an alliteration, but not resume. But resume. Resume.

Jesus said, do the first works. That's what he's talking about. I guess we could translate it. Get to it. You know, we don't always. He doesn't want us just kind of groveling in regret about, you know, our poor spiritual condition and how bad we've been and how, you know, weak of faith we have been.

[9:04] We just kind of, if we're not careful, we can just have ourselves an ongoing pity party about that. And never really get to it. Get back to it.

Well, just get to it. Start loving me and adoring me and worshiping me and serving me. Doing loving works. All right. So, you know, get back to it. Now, some of the works that we've been doing that were loveless are still the same works we need to be doing.

It's not necessarily true that the loveless kind of self-centered works we've been doing are bad works.

It's just we've been doing it for the wrong reason. Some of those things continue, so we continue those. And maybe there are some other things we have let go and dropped off because we have lost our love for Jesus or it's cooled.

And we need to get those going again. But then I would add to that or else because, well, it's not me adding it. That's the Bible. That's the Lord adding it.

[10:07] Or else. Or else what? Well, verse 5, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place unless you repent. Now, those are pretty serious words. Not pretty serious.

They're very serious. Very serious words. He's talking to a specific church, a local church. And so his words, his warning to them is a warning to any individual local body of believers, whatever their name might be.

So it would apply to us as well. Or else you don't get back to it. Back to where you've fallen through remembering, repenting, getting back to it, resuming.

Then I'm going to take your lampstand away. Someone has said that Jesus had a no pass, no play rule. Only he called it no love, no light.

No love, no light. Take your lampstand away. Take your light away. If there's no real love for Jesus in your life. But now we're talking in the context of the church. If there's no real community of love for Jesus, then the reason for our existence as a church or any church's existence just simply vanishes away.

[11:21] Maybe not forever. Hopefully not. But it's, for all practical purposes, gone because we have no light. We have no light.

All we have are programs and buildings and budgets and, you know, just simply loveless works, which are just fleshly.

So we have no light. And we may continue to be active. And many churches are, in fact, I forgot who it was who said it.

It may have been Billy Graham. Said if the Holy Spirit were to die today, most churches would go on unchanged. Continue to do the same thing they've been doing because none of their works were filled with the Holy Spirit.

And so the activity may go on. Ministries will go on. We may be busy with various, we could say, quote, worthy ministries. And we may have one of the most exciting worship services.

[12:20] A church could have that. And yet, if we do not genuinely adore and glorify and love the Lord Jesus Christ, then from God's view we have no real existence, no real need for reason for existence.

He says, he who has an ear, let him hear. All right? We've got an ear. Let's hear this, what the Spirit says to the churches. And to him who overcomes, I will give to eat from the tree of life which is in the midst of the paradise of God.

I'll mention something about overcomers when we get to the end of the church of Smyrna. So let's move on to the next letter. That is the church of Smyrna.

Smyrna is the fearful church. The fearful church. Ephesus, I said, was the fallen church. Smyrna, the fearful church.

Now, I want you to remember, remind you of one of the ways of looking at these seven churches, these seven letters, and I mentioned this last week. And that is to see each of these churches representing a different era in church history.

[13:33] And so in that sense, these letters can serve prophetically to give us a, you know, the broad view of the various eras, ages of the churches from the first church, the first century church, to the church that is in existence today.

And just to remind you, I said that Ephesus, or I didn't, this is John Phillips, kind of his view. Ephesus is the post-apostolic church.

Now, this isn't in your notes. This was last week. That Ephesus represents the post-apostolic church, just right after the apostles. And so, soon after the deaths of the apostles, the church began to cool.

In fact, really before the apostles were all gone, that would include also Paul, the church had begun to struggle and have kind of a cooling time.

They had, again, they had left their first love. They had fallen. In fact, some of the New Testament letters are written to address some of that problem. So Ephesus is the post-apostolic church.

[14:45] And then we have Smyrna, which is the persecuted church. That's why I'm calling Smyrna the fearful church. It was a persecuted church.

And so Smyrna represents that time in church history when the early church came under perhaps the most intense persecution that the church has ever known.

Now, the church is still persecuted today. But I'm talking about the whole church because it only existed in a very small area of the world. And they were under intense persecution to the point of, you know, the world trying to eradicate Christianity entirely.

And so the church of Smyrna represents that church, though clearly the church has always experienced persecution. All right, so we need to keep that in mind as we look at the letter to the Smyrna church.

Let me read a historical description of a man who lived in this time period. This will help us get started with this. And let me just read it to you.

[15 : 49] Quote about a man who lived in this time period. He said he was just three years old when his father died. It was little loss to the boy for his father had been a killer, a bully, and a cheat.

I don't know why I put it in that order. I think I'd go cheat, bully, and killer. But anyway, his mother took over the family trade and continued the boy's education.

She murdered his stepfather with a dish of poison mushrooms. So clearly he was reared in an environment of murder, which, of course, greatly affected his outlook on life.

He once killed a teenage boy who stood in his way and watched him die with callous indifference. He married at 15, but soon after he had her killed.

He married again and murdered his second wife as well. In order to marry a third time, he murdered the husband of the woman he wanted. His mother annoyed him, so he arranged for her to be murdered.

[16 : 50] He was, in appearance, a very ugly man with a bull neck and beetle brows and flat nose and tough mouth. I'm not sure what that means.

He had a pot belly, spindly legs, bad skin, and an offensive odor. At the age of 31, he was sentenced to death by flogging.

He fled, to escape that, he fled to a dingy basement and, in the house of a slave, cut his own throat. In addition to these atrocities, this man gave the infant church its first taste of things to come.

His name was Nero. Nero. We could say a lot more about him. He was the first of the persecuting Caesars of Rome. Now, when John wrote these letters, when John wrote the revelation that was given to him on the Isle of Patmos, Nero had come and gone.

It was already over. And so another Caesar was on the throne during this time. His name was Domitian. And he, too, was a tyrant and tremendously, relentlessly persecuted the church.

[18 : 05] All right, so John then is addressing a church that was soon to face bitter persecution. Now, they were already being persecuted. The church has faced persecution from the very beginning.

But during the period of these, from Nero for several Caesars, the church endured bitter persecution.

Someone has identified Smyrna as the cameo of the church under fire. Now, what I want to do is consider three messages the Lord Jesus had for this church.

First, the false trend at Smyrna. The message starts out kind of good, kind of positive. And then it identifies a trend in this church that Jesus wanted to address.

Now, it's interesting how the letter begins. Jesus, first of all, reminds them of His personal victory. Reminds them and us. He reminds them of His personal victory.

[19 : 11] Verse 8 says, These things says the first and the last. You know, that's an identification of Jesus. Who was, what? Dead and came to life.

All right, that's a statement of His victory. Death upon the cross and His resurrection. Victory over sin and death. And really, here at the very beginning of the letter, what better way to begin the letter if the letter is to be an encouragement to a group of people who are about to undergo severe, severe persecution as believers.

What better way than to do this than to remind them of Christ's victory over death? And that's always the thing we need to be reminded of when, as believers, we experience the persecution. Persecution just because we're Christians. These people in Smyrna were already enduring persecution. Many of them even unto death.

And eventually would endure strong persecution even unto death. But Jesus is saying to them, He's saying, I'm the one who has already conquered death.

[20 : 27] Keep that in your minds. Keep this in perspective when you endure persecution. And even the threat of death because you're a believer. Jesus is the one who's already conquered

death.

And He's saying to them, I was the one that was dead, but now I'm alive. You remember what Paul said in 1 Corinthians chapter 15 and verse 54.

He said, death is swallowed up in victory. Death, where is your sting? Hades or hell or the grave, where is your victory? Alright, now, this reminder then of personal victory for them is also a reminder of not only Christ's personal victory, but theirs as well.

And ours as well. They will have victory over death through Christ, and so will we. Then, second, Jesus assures them not only of His personal victory, but His divine knowledge.

This really gets us to the heart of the matter here. He knows three things about them. He knows their persecution.

[21:42] Jesus knows their persecution. Verse 9, I know your works, comma, tribulation. That's how it is in the New King James.

But I need to tell you that the word works does not appear in the best manuscripts. That's why many of the versions don't have works there. The idea is tribulation.

I know your persecution, your tribulation. The word I know is a, there are a number of, at least two main words in the Greek language for the word I know or know.

This one is a word that means to perceive. It says I perceive, I discern. Not just simply I see with my eyes, but I discern. I see it, but I also understand it, is what Jesus is saying.

I am paying attention. I understand. So here they are, you know, this church, these people in Smyrna, under intense persecution, and they are tempted to say, as we would be tempted to say, God, don't you even know what's going on?

[22:50] Do you even see this? And so Jesus, I think, puts this on the front end. He doesn't want them to be in the dark about this. And He doesn't want us to be in the dark about it either. When we are suffering for the cause of Christ.

So He puts it right at the front end. He tells them straight out, I absolutely know all about it. So, well, never think that, that the Lord doesn't see what's going on in our life.

He absolutely does know. And so, in relation to this church, as well as all believers who suffer for the cause of Christ, it's an encouragement to us to know that God, God's people, that God knows what's going on.

Every sob, every tear, every heartache, every point of pain, and persecution, and fear, and on and on, is fully known by God.

So He knows their persecution. Then also, He knows their poverty. Verse 9, I know your poverty. And then, parenthetically, He says, but you are rich.

[24:00] That's rather interesting. Now, how did they become poor? And the idea is poor materially. All right. How did that happen? Well, in fact, historians tell us that Smyrna was a very, very wealthy community.

And yet, the believers there were poor. And why would that be? Well, we can, I think, speculate, and probably be right on many of these things. For one thing, if you were a Christian businessman or woman, if there were business women in that day, I'm not sure.

But if you were, and I'm not just talking about those who have a little shop set up, but even those who are selling any kind of goods or wares or whatever, if you're a Christian, then you would suffer to a degree because of your honesty and integrity.

In fact, there are business people today who are strong believers that would give testimony to, you know, having to say no to maybe a windfall and profit because they are running their business according to biblical principles.

Of course, there are also many testimonies of how God compensated for that and greatly blessed them, but not in all cases. Christian business people, men and women, if they're going to go with God's word and biblical principles, then you're not always going to be successful.

[25:26] And apparently, that was the case here. And so, Christian business people had to maybe suffer, maybe even suffer the loss of their businesses because they were going to operate according to biblical principles and that just wouldn't work in their culture.

You could also probably speculate that Jews and not just Jews, but also pagans, would not trade with Christians.

Buy or sell their goods because they were believers and they were persecuted people and the government was trying to snuff them out. And so, maybe it was even a dangerous thing to have any

kind of relationship with believers, especially to buy things from them or sell to them.

Also, I think you could assume that employment was hard to get for a Christian in a pagan city and society. It's also at least implied, in fact, I wouldn't think it's implied, I think it's pretty direct, that many times believers' property was confiscated when they became Christians, plundered by the local governments, corrupt governments and officials, even pagan citizens.

In fact, in Hebrews 10:32, did I put that verse on there for you? Okay. There's an indication of that here where Jesus, or where the Bible says, but recall the former days in which after you were illuminated, which is a reference to their salvation, you endured a great struggle with sufferings, partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations and partly while you became companions of those who were so treated.

[27:09] All right, so not just you were persecuted, but just because you were a believer, but because you were associated with believers. For you had compassion on me and my chains, probably a reference to Paul, but Tom, you'll have to work that out.

And joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods. All right, that's what I'm really wanting to get to. Joyfully accepting the plundering of your goods. All right, so this was the lot for many Christians in the world of that day, but he adds, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven.

So, a great reminder. Now, whatever the reason or reasons for their poverty, it certainly did not pay to be a Christian in Smyrna, apparently, because they were poor.

And, you know, that leads, I think, to a good question for us. When it comes to deciding whether you're going to honor, serve the Lord Jesus, or make money, and you can only choose one or the other and not both, when it comes to that, which one are you going to pick?

Now, thankfully, at least thus far, in most cases, we've not had to have that kind of choice, but someday we may. But, these believers in Smyrna made their choice and it was to serve the Lord.

[28:33] And, the result was poverty. And yet, what did Jesus say? Parenthetically, he said, you are rich. And, I'm not talking out of both sides of the mouth, it's not a contradiction, poverty is a reference to material things, the richness, the wealth, the prosperity, pertain to spiritual things.

Now, Jesus is a prime example, isn't he, for us to follow. 2 Corinthians 8, 9, For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor.

Know that verse? He became poor. That you, through his poverty, might become what? Rich. A prime example. think about this, and I'll finish this up here tonight.

Jesus was no stranger to poverty, was he? Everything we can understand from Scripture, I know that there are some, you know, pseudo-theologians out there that want to have us believe that Jesus was wealthy, wealthy, very, very wealthy.

but he wasn't. I mean, everything we get from Scripture, he was poor. He didn't even have a pillow to lay his head on. But think of the riches in heaven that Jesus enjoyed, and think about how he laid all that aside, put all that aside.

[29:55] He emptied himself to come as Savior. Now, someone might say, well, that's true. He did lay all that aside, give all that up, but he's rich now, isn't he?

I mean, you know, he's back in heaven, and it would be easy, perhaps, to give up everything if you knew one day you were going to get it all back. That's what some people argue, but that reasoning misses the whole point.

Jesus gave it all up so that when he got, when he got it all back, which he did, guess who also got it all?

We did. We did. Now, what have we given up to receive the riches of glory? Well, I don't know about you, but I haven't given up anything.

In fact, relative to the believers in Smyrna, as well as countless of millions of believers over the centuries, multiplied millions, and even thousands upon thousands in our world today, compared to them, we've not given up anything.

[31:02] But the believers at Smyrna had lost nearly every material possession they had, and so, in the estimation of the Lord Jesus, they were rich.

They were rich because why? They had invested their treasures in heaven. Their treasure was in heaven, where, remember, according to Jesus in Matthew 6, 20, neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in and steal.

So, he knows their persecution, he knows their poverty, and then next time we'll consider that he knows their problem. Go ahead and fill that one in. this is all leading to a problem they have, and it's, in a sense, very paradoxical, and we'll get to that next time.
Thank you.