

Being an Overcomer #3

Church #2: Smyrna – the Persecuted Church

Rev. 2:8-11

Jesus describes himself as “the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive.” He says this because the message to Smyrna was one of death and life.

Commendations to the church:

1. Rev. 2:9 - He acknowledges their works, and tribulation, and poverty

A life of trials and tribulation should be considered normal for Christians.

Mt. 5:10-12 – blessed when persecuted for righteousness’ sake. Rejoice.

Mt. 24:9-13 – “Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name’s sake. ... But he that endureth unto the end shall be saved.”

Jn. 15:18-21 – the world hates us because we are “not of this world”, and for Jesus’ name

Ac. 14:22 – “...we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.”

Phl. 1:29 – After being stoned and left for dead, Paul told the believers “For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake.”

1 P. 1:6-7 – these “manifold temptations” are a trial of our faith, which is more precious than gold

1 P. 4:12-19 – “Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ’s sufferings ...”

Historically, many people have been delivered from death (Daniel, three Hebrews in the fire, Heb. 11), but others have had to pay the ultimate price (also Heb. 11). We don’t know which it will be, but our determination is the same. Dan. 3:17-18 – “If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.”

Rev. 2:9 – I know thy ... poverty, (but thou art rich) ...”

God does give us promises of provision, but will sometimes allow His people to suffer some degree of lack, for some period of time. Yet even in the midst of that poverty, he reminds us that we are really rich.

Jas. 2:5 – Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom ...

Mt. 6:19-21 – Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven. Where your treasure is will be your heart.

Col. 1:27 – To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

2. Rev. 2:9 - He notes “the blasphemy of them that say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.”

This is surely viewed by Jews as evidence of the so-called anti-Semitism of the NT. But it is not a blanket condemnation of all Jews – Jesus, the disciples, and the early church were all Jewish. Still, it is obvious that most of the opposition in the early days was from the Jewish leaders, who stood to lose their own position and authority. Not even all of the chief leaders and Pharisees were opposers, though.

God’s people have always been ridiculed, blasphemed, and resisted by the followers and leaders of false religion, or by those who have “branched off” from the true.

Seth vs. Cain

Children of Abraham vs. children of Lot (Moabites, Ammonites)

Children of Jacob vs. children of Esau (Edomites)

Moses vs. Korah, Dathan, Abiram

Nehemiah vs. Sanballat and Tobiah

Jewish people vs. the Herodian kings, puppets of Rome

Jesus and early church vs. Jewish leaders

Christians vs. Rome

Popes vs. Tyndale, Huss, Luther, ...

Catholics, Lutherans, and some Calvinists vs. Anabaptists

“Normal Protestants” vs. the Pentecostal experience

Christians vs. atheistic humanism and Islam

Warnings and Admonitions: 2:10

1. "Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer"

Even though we know that suffering will come, we are not to fear it. Why? Because

- Fear shows a lack of trust in God. Isa. 41:10
- He will give us the strength to overcome. (Isa. 41:10)
- He will give us the words when we need them. Lk. 12:11-12
- We can be confident that whatever happens will not be more than we can bear. 1 Cor. 10:13
- We are bearing Christ's sufferings (those he would be suffering if he were still physically present). Phl. 1:29, Col. 1:24
- We can know that by patient endurance we glorify God (1. P. 4:16)
- We know that neither good nor bad experiences will last forever in this life. In persecutions, either we will be delivered in some way, or we will enjoy the rewards of heaven after death. On the contrary, the rewards and punishments after death are eternal.

2. "The devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried, and ye shall have tribulation ten days"

This can certainly be taken quite literally, because we have 2000 years of confirming experience. But what does it mean by "ten days"? I don't know positively, although I have read various explanations from church history. We can see though, that while periods of intense persecution may come, they will mostly be localized, and they don't last forever. Satan is apparently allowed by God to afflict us in a place and for a time, but then must "back off", like we see in Job 1-2.

3. "Be thou faithful unto death"

One example actually from Smyrna took place around 155AD, with the martyrdom of Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna. Foxe's Book of Martyrs tells the story, quoting Eusebius.

2 Cor. 4:16-18 – For which cause we faint not ... our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory ... we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen ..."

Promises to overcomers:

1. "I will give you a crown of life" Rev. 2:10

2 Tim. 4:6-8 is a good example of looking past the pain of death to the crown that awaits

This reminds of the "Facing the Giants" movie clip Tim played recently, with the "blind-folded death crawl".

We don't know where our finish line is in this life, but we must overcome steady to the end. We don't stop until we are "on the other side".

Rev. 20:4 – "... the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, ... they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years. ...

2. "He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death." Rev. 2:11

Rev. 20:6 - ... on such the second death hath no power ...

So in summary, how can we overcome, based on the message to Smyrna? The basic message is faithfulness through persecution, but specifically,

1. Be faithful to Christ even when experiencing tribulation or poverty.
2. Recognize where our true riches lie.
3. Do not be intimidated or moved by the oppositions of "religious" people.
4. Do not fear tribulation, imprisonment, or even death.
5. Be faithful "unto death" – don't give up before you reach the finish line.