

How to Endure Persecution

Text:

Revelation 2:8-11

And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: 'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.'

Introduction:

Smyrna, like Ephesus, was a port city on the west coast of the Roman province of Asia. Starting from Ephesus and following the major highway north it was the next major city. Here are two cities approximately 50 miles apart, but the church in each faces a different challenge. In the last study we saw that Ephesus' challenge was to get back on track, to return to the love that it had had at the beginning. From the text we have just read we see that Smyrna faces another obstacle, persecution.

Smyrna was a very loyal Roman subject and as such a center of Emperor worship. It also had a significant Jewish population that had sided with the Romans in their hatred of the Christians. These Christians had already suffered the loss of their goods, and now they were about to be thrown in prison and even put to death for their loyalty to Christ. If Christ speaks to the Church at Ephesus to tell them how to get back on track, he speaks to the Church at Smyrna to tell them how to suffer persecution.

Someone might say to themselves at this point: "well, this is a lesson we can skip." "After all we are in America, the land of freedom, the place where religious liberty was invented." Before moving on too rapidly to the next step, allow me to suggest two reasons why we need to listen to Christ's counsel to the Church of Smyrna. First, if we are not being persecuted others are. Remember the admonition of the book of Hebrews: "Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body" (Hebrews 13:3). We may not be persecuted, but more Christians are being persecuted as we

speak this morning than ever before in the history of Christianity. If we are fortunate enough to live in Ephesus, we must not forget our brothers and sister in Christ in Smyrna.

The second reason why we should take the counsel of Christ contained in this text seriously is simply that we do not know the future. This is the first Sunday of the New Year. We all have plans and projects for 2011, but we also know that the unknown awaits us. None of us can predict the future. We know that Christ has called us to follow him to the ends of our lives, but none of us can know where that will be and all that it will entail. It is best to be prepared for every eventually. This being the case our text tells us three things that we need to know when we face persecution:

- Our Enemy
- Our Savior
- Our Destiny

I. Our Enemy

Why, we might ask, would anyone want to persecute Christians? Aren't we good citizens? Don't we render unto Caesar, the things that are Caesars? Aren't we under obligation to love even our enemies, to seek the good of those around us? Aren't we kind and honest, good neighbors and faithful friends? Isn't it true that wherever the gospel goes things get better; peoples' lives improve? Don't we specialize in things like education and health care? Why would anyone want to persecute us? The full answer to that question is outside the scope of one sermon, but the answer contained in the text is essential. The risen Christ says to these believers as they face imprisonment and death: "the devil is about to throw some of you into prison". Listen to this quote from R. C. Trench:

"The manner in which this persecution of the saints is here traced to the direct agency of Satan, is very well worthy of observation. We sometimes assume that Christians were persecuted, because the truth for which they bore witness traversed the interests, affronted the pride, would have checked the passions of men; and this is most true; but we have not so reached to the ground of the matter. There is nothing more remarkable in the records which have come down to us of the early persecutions, and in this point they singularly illustrate the Scripture before us, than the sense which the confessors and martyrs and those who afterwards narrate their sufferings and their triumphs, entertain and utter, that these great fights of affliction through which they were called to pass were the immediate work of the devil, and no mere result of the offended passions, prejudices, or interests of men. The enemies of flesh and blood, as mere tools

and instruments, are nearly lost sight of by them in a constant reference to Satan as the invisible but most real author of it all." (R. C. Trench, *Epistles to the Seven Churches in Asia*, 1897, pp. 111-112).

We could dig into the historical background at Smyrna and explain why the Romans here were especially anti Christian, but the essential thing Christ wants us to know is that behind the human enemies is the real enemy. Knowing this enables us to fulfill the law of Christ and love our enemies. The history of Christian martyrdom is a history of forgiveness, of men and women forgiving their enemies and persecutors as they faced gallows, fire and sword without malice or vengeance towards their enemies, but in the knowledge that somehow their deaths were contributing to the final overthrow of the kingdom of Satan.

II. Our Savior

Never forget that the book from which this text is taken is called "The Revelation of Jesus Christ". It is not, as some think, the revelation of what is going to take place in the future, but the Revelation of Jesus Christ, who is the future. Preceding these seven letters is a striking symbolic vision of the Risen Christ. Christ then, in addressing each church, takes a part of that vision to describe himself. He reminds these believers in Smyrna that he is "the first and the last, who died and came to life". As they face the possibility of death, he reminds them that he has been there before them, that he faced death and overcame it. This is the reason the Epistle to the Hebrews refers to Christ as the pioneer of our faith. The pioneer is the one who goes before, who opens the way for others to come behind. Christ went where no one had ever gone before and returned victorious. Therefore he can say to us: "do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer." Or, As he said to his disciples while still on earth: "And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" Matthew 10:28).

Dying for Christ makes sense only because he died for us, and opened the way to eternal life. Dying for Christ makes sense because if we die in Christ, "the second death cannot hurt us." Those who die for Christ are not dying for a cause or an ideal, but are remaining faithful to the one who is the only source of eternal life. This brings us to the last thing that we need to know.

III. Our Destiny

Be faithful unto death and I will give you a crown of life. The worst result possible of our faithfulness to Jesus Christ is death, but death does not hold for the Christian a sense of

ultimate doom, but of eternal hope. The hope of our eternal destiny sustains us in the moment of death and in the crucible of persecution. Before he knew that he would become Hitler's prisoner and eventually a martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer had stated in a sermon:

“No one has yet believed in God and the Kingdom of God. No one has yet heard about the realm of the resurrected, and not been homesick from that hour, waiting and looking forward joyfully to being released from bodily existence. . . . Death is hell and night and cold, if it is not transformed by our faith. But that is just what is so marvelous, that we can transform death.”

It is for this reason that, the doctor that was present at his execution said of him: “In the almost fifty years that I have worked as a doctor, I have rarely ever seen a man die so entirely submitted to the will of God.”

Conclusion:

As in the case of Ephesus so in the case of Smyrna history provides evidence that the message of Christ was heeded. Polycarp was one of the premier Christian leaders of the 2nd century. He was himself taught by the Apostle John and became the leader of this very church at Smyrna. When he was an old man of eighty six years the persecution had once again broken out. At the insistence of others he fled the city to a farm where he had a dream that he would perish in the flames. When the Roman authorities came to arrest him, he did not resist. They took him back to Smyrna and at this point I quote directly from the account of Eusebius Book IV ch. xv:

“He was met by Herod who was the irenarch, and his father Nicetes: who, taking him into their vehicle, persuaded him to take a seat with them, and said, “For what harm is there in saying Lord Caesar, and to sacrifice, and thus save your life?” He, however, did not at first make any reply; but as they persevered, he said, “I shall not do what you advise me.”

Later as he stands before the governor and is again asked to deny Christ this is his answer: “Revile Christ;” Polycarp replied, “Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never did me wrong; and how can I now blaspheme my King that has saved me?” The conversation then continues and Polycarp offers to instruct the governor in the Christian Faith. Upon this the governor again calls on him to repent or he will call the executioners. To this he replies: “Call them. For we have no reason to repent from the better to the worse, but it is good to change from wickedness to virtue.” They burned him and he died victoriously.

