

Jesus Speaks to His Church: “Stand Up Under Pressure!”

By Dr. Mark Smith

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Revelation 2:8-11, Matthew 5:10-11

You may remember that the Apostle John, while he was worshipping on the Lord’s day on the island of Patmos, experienced a magnificent vision of Jesus walking among seven golden lamp stands, each lamp stand representing one of the seven churches of the Roman province of Asia (what is today the western part of Turkey.) Jesus told John to write down what he was saying to each church. Some of his words are comforting and encouraging. Others are challenging and confronting. Though Jesus was speaking to ancient churches, his words are relevant to our church and to our lives today.

Last week, we studied Jesus’ words to the church at Ephesus and heard the call for us to fall in love with him again. There is nothing worse than a loveless church – a church without passion; love is the first mark of any church that would call itself Christian.

Today we visit the city of Smyrna and here we find not a loveless church, but a *suffering* church – a church under severe pressure.

To set the context, let me tell you a little about the city of Smyrna itself. It was second in importance only to the city of Ephesus in that part of the world. Interestingly, it is the only city of the seven that is still in existence today (the modern day city of Izmir, Turkey, which is the third largest city in the country). Thirty-five miles north of Ephesus on the eastern shore of the Aegean Sea, Smyrna possessed an excellent harbor and was a busy commercial center. The city itself was built on and around a large hill – Mt. Pagus. And at the top of the hill is a castle built by Alexander the Great, which still stands today (with medieval modification).

Very little of the ancient city survives – much of it lies under more modern buildings. However, they have uncovered what is called the “agora” or “forum” - which was the public square and situated on the main road in town. Some of the pillars that were toppled by an earthquake in 167 AD have been re-erected. The city was rebuilt by the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, and a sculpture of his wife graces one of the arches that has been restored.

A proud and beautiful city, Smyrna boasted a famous stadium, library, and it was the site of the largest public theater in all of Asia. It was the birthplace of the great epic poet Homer. It was a large city -- in New Testament times the population may have been over 100,000. Coins from the period describe Smyrna as “First of Asia in beauty and size.”

The city seemed to have had a special relationship with Rome. Highly patriotic, it applied for and won the right to build a huge temple to the Emperor Tiberius. It also had a rather large Jewish population.

We don’t know when the church in Smyrna was founded, but it was probably established through the efforts of Paul on one of his missionary journeys. It is to the church at Smyrna that Jesus now speaks:

To the Church in Smyrna

⁸ **“To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:**

These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. ⁹ I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰ Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.

¹¹ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death. ¹

“I know your afflictions,” says Jesus. The Greek word for “affliction” is a strong word -- it means “crushing pressure.” The Christians at Smyrna were experiencing the “crushing pressure” of persecution. The enemies of the faith seemed especially aggressive and cruel in this place. It galled many of Smyrna’s citizens that Christians refused to worship the Emperor; to them it seemed shamefully unpatriotic and downright treasonous. All Christians had to do was burn a pinch of incense at Caesar’s altar, say “Caesar is Lord”, receive their certificate, and go off to worship as they pleased. But the Christians refused to conform. Jesus Christ alone was their Lord! They would not give lip service to Caesar just to be safe from persecution. For them, either “Christ was all, or not all...” They refused to compromise -- therefore they were persecuted.

This persecution, judging by this letter to Smyrna, took various forms:

They were persecuted economically, leading to crushing poverty. They were rich spiritually, but poor materially. Christian shops were undoubtedly boycotted. They may also have been the victims of mob violence and looting (Heb. 10:34).

Christians were also the victims of slander. They were accused of all kinds of subversive, anti-social activity. There was a very hostile Jewish population in Smyrna that did its best to stamp out Christianity by spreading malicious gossip.

Some Christians were arrested and thrown into prison for their faith. For some it meant death.

There is a very famous story that comes from this period of church history. It concerns Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna in the second century. His life, message and martyrdom helps us to focus on the meaning of Jesus’ message to the church there.

As the story goes, a mob, which had already put several Christians to death, started to call for Polycarp’s death as well, for he was a well known leader in the area. His friends persuaded him to leave the city, finding a place to hide in the country. A fourth century church historian tells us that Polycarp *“remained with a few companions, devoting himself night and day to constant prayer to the Lord, pleading and imploring as he had always done that God would grant peace to the churches throughout the world.”*

But the authorities hunted him down, brought him back to the city, and threw him into the sports arena, where a huge crowd had gathered and were calling for his death. As the account reads, *“a voice from heaven cried, “Be strong, Polycarp, and play the man.”*

The city magistrate pressured him to deny Christ and swear to Caesar, but Polycarp refused. His reply is famous: *“Eighty-six years have I served Christ, and He has never done me wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”*

The people were enraged. They gathered logs for a fire to burn him at the stake. As the flames devoured his body, he prayed:

“I thank You that You have graciously thought me worthy of this day and of this hour, that in the number of the martyrs I may partake of Christ’s cup, to the resurrection of both soul and body.”

Polycarp’s resolute stand for Christ - his faithfulness - was representative of the Christians in Smyrna. Smyrna was a dangerous place to be a Christian. Jesus knew that and he praised the faithfulness of his people in that city – they were spiritually rich because of it. They were to be commended for standing up under the crushing pressure of godless forces. Jesus encouraged them to continue to do so. *“Don’t fear. Hold on and hold out in faith!”* he was saying: *“Be faithful under pressure.”*

God’s people have always been under pressure by a hostile world. Jesus warned his disciples of persecution to come:

“If the world hates you, know that it has 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 persecute you...”

Jesus pronounced his blessing upon those who would be persecuted for his sake:

“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Virtually all the original disciples were put to death for Jesus’ sake. We all remember how Christians were thrown to the lions in the Roman coliseum in the early days of the church.

So it has been through the centuries and it is still very much the case today, many Christians are under terrific pressure and are being persecuted for their faith. They are witnessing in environments that are truly “crushing.”

It’s true in China and Vietnam where it is illegal to worship outside of officially approved churches. These “official churches” are forbidden to preach the resurrection of Christ and are under strict controls.

It’s true all over the Middle East – where Christians face discrimination and threats and are prohibited from sharing their faith with non-Christians.

It's true in the Sudan in Africa, where the Islamic government has engaged in a policy of forcible conversion.

It's true in Turkey, where the small, emerging church is considered (wrongly) to be anti-Turkish. There is a growing church in Smyrna (Izmir) today that is doing its best to witness to Jesus in spite of a generally hostile environment.

The reality is that many Christians in our world today are experiencing the crushing pressures of a hostile culture just as they did in earlier times, and many, therefore, can immediately relate to the situation at Smyrna. And yet, in spite of it all, they are standing up, remaining faithful to the Lord.

I am incredibly inspired and humbled by these folks who are willing to suffer so for Christ's sake. I marvel at their faith and their commitment to the Lord. They are totally surrendered to him. These people are willing to put their very lives on the line to follow Jesus. They refuse to compromise their faith and bow down to other gods and other Lords. For them, Jesus is the only way to God; they truly believe that *"there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."* (Acts 4:12)

Can we in Mukilteo relate to any of this? We seem a world removed from Smyrna of the New Testament and from "Smyrnas" in other parts of the world where believers regularly face hardship and outright persecution.

We Christians in western countries have it comparatively easy. After all, we live in a place where there is freedom of worship. We are not persecuted by political authorities; none of us are likely to be arrested for sharing our Christian faith in public. Government agents are not sitting in the pews with us today to make sure I tow the party line in the pulpit. Whatever pressures we face are nothing like what people in other parts of the world are facing. It's far easier to be an open Christian here than most other places in this world - for which we praise God.

That said, it is true that we western Christians do face some hostility in our culture – and that hostility seems to be growing. In some circles, Christians are treated with disdain and contempt, lumped together as *"religious fanatics who are always trying to ram their beliefs down people's throats."* In some places, it's just not cool to be a Christian, as is often the case on college campuses. There are those in our society who would silence the voice of the Christian church in the public marketplace of ideas, or at least, consign it to the private realm. Whatever we "suffer," the Lord urges us to stand up and be counted, and not be ashamed of the gospel, for *"it is the power of salvation to everyone who believes..."*

But let us acknowledge other pressures that would cause us to deny the gospel and to fall away from Jesus Christ. These pressures can be all too subtle and therefore all the more dangerous. We may not bow the knee to Caesar, but we have other gods that would claim our ultimate allegiance. The great cultural gods of money, power, sex, and the faddish philosophies and self-help techniques of the day all promise their own kind of salvation. These "rival gods" are stronger than we think – they pressure us to compromise our faith, leading us down the pathway to heartache and disappointment and ruin.

Jesus is the way to God, and it is only through him that we find true life. Do you and I believe that? The martyrs of the faith were willing to stake their lives upon that truth. They were that committed to Jesus as Lord and they would tolerate no rivals. They would bow the knee to no other person and to no other philosophy. Are you and I, in the midst of all the pressures of life, committed to him as well? Is he truly Lord? Are we fully surrendered to him?

The Lord, of course, never promises we shall never have trouble or hardship or temptation. The good news is that no matter what we are dealing with, no matter what or who threatens us, our suffering is limited – it will not go on forever. Jesus says that church in Smyrna will suffer for “ten days” – the meaning is not totally clear – but it does carry the sense that suffering is time-bound and it will come to an end. The fact is, as Jesus reminds us in his letter to Smyrna, he is the first and the last – our lives are in his hands and is ultimately in control, and our lives are bounded by his steadfast love. If we Christians hold on and hold out in faithfulness in times of crushing pressure, looking to Christ to sustain us, we shall win the victor’s crown: *“Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.”*

Whatever pressures we face because of our allegiance to Christ, let us stand up and stand firm in the strength of the Lord. Against the negative pressures of that which would separate us from God there are the far stronger compensating pressures of God’s love and God’s strength. He says to us what he said to the Christians in Smyrna:

I know your affliction. I know what you are dealing with – the kinds of pressures you are facing – the hostility many of you have had to put up with - for I had to put up with it too. Know that I am the first and the last, the living one, who will help you remain steadfast and immovable, always abounding in the work I have given you. Whatever you suffer on my account will be rewarded in my kingdom. Blessed are you -- rejoice and be glad. Just wait and see. It will be worth it in the end. You will win the crown of life at the end of the race. You will conquer. Let anyone who has an ear, hear what the Spirit is saying to his church:

Be faithful. Stand up under pressure!