**The Church in Smyrna**

***The Struggling Church***

Sunday School Lesson 2

*Lessons from the Seven Churches*

*Revelation 2:8-11*

2/23/2020

**Introduction:** The next church recorded in the book of Revelation is the church located in Smyrna. Very little is known about this church, as its founding is not mentioned in the book of Acts. The city of Smyrna was located forty miles north of Ephesus. It is likely that the church was started by Paul, as he was spreading the Gospel throughout every city in Asia. John also had a particular interest in the church in Smyrna, as he later recommended one of his young converts to be the pastor of the church. This young man was named Polycarp, and he was later burned at the stake and stabbed to death in Smyrna because he would not bow down the knee to the Roman emperor. Smyrna was filled with loyalists to the Roman empire. This loyalty was the source of much persecution to the church there. The Jewish community in the city also helped to stamp out church members. There was at least a dozen known church leaders who were martyred in that church in the first and second century. Since the Roman emperors had begun to view themselves as gods, temples to the emperors were built in various cities. Smyrna had multiple temples built to honor the Roman emperor. Somehow, in this midst of this emperor-worship, a small church continued to exist. When the Lord spoke to the church, He did not have to reprove them. Instead, He commended them for their faithfulness to the work. While the persecution of this church does not resemble the conditions of very many churches today, its struggle does help us identify some similarities with many present-day churches.

1. THE CHURCH WAS COMMENDED FOR THEIR WORKS, NOT THEIR RESULTS. (REV. 2:9)
2. **Notice that the Lord observed all of the works that they were doing (9a).** Perhaps, the members of this church felt, at times, that their works were going unnoticed. After all, it can be difficult to work if there are not immediate results to show for it. The Lord reminded the church that He knew their works. He saw everything that they were doing. He saw every time that the church spread the Gospel. He saw and heard their prayers for others. They did not get mentioned in the acts of the church. They did not get their own epistle recorded in Scripture. They did not get the same attention that other churches, such as those in Ephesus, Rome, and Jerusalem, received. Yet, that did no minimize the work that they were doing. Over half of all Baptist churches in America have less than 75 people in their weekly attendance. When a pastor meets another pastor, one of the first questions that are often asked is how many people that pastor has in the church that they minister to. While this is not necessarily sinful, it does show how we tend to only gage success off of the results. The Lord is looking at our labor. Are we doing what He has commanded us to do? If we are, we can take comfort in knowing that we are pleasing Him.
3. **Notice that the Lord viewed their poverty but saw the church as rich (9a).** In Smyrna, it was required for the citizens to offer yearly burnt incense to the emperor. When this offering was completed, a certificate was given to the participant. This certificate was vital in employment. When conducting business with anyone in the city, a person may be asked to produce their certificate from the emperor. Any person found without a certificate would be jailed, and some would even be killed. Obviously, those who were in the church would not bow the knee to the emperor, so they were without certificates. This made it very difficult for them to conduct business in the city. The result, of course, was the poverty of those who were within the church. They were not wealthy like the church at Philippi. Yet, Jesus viewed them as rich. Again, many church members gage the church’s success on whether the offering plates are filled. That’s not what Jesus’ attention is on. The Lord would rather have a working church than an ornate church building. He’d rather have a church of witnesses than a church of wealthiness.
4. THE CHURCH WAS COMMENDED FOR THEIR ENDURING OF RIDICULE. (REVELATION 2:9)
5. **Notice that the church had to endure tribulation (9a).** Jesus told His disciples that they would have to endure tribulation (John 16). As mentioned in the introduction, this church had to endure severe affliction. Tribulation is different from trials. Tribulation comes through the persecuting hand of another person. *Trial* is the generic term for any circumstance that tests us, whether by the hand of persecution or by some other means. Some churches are able to handle trials, but it seems that few are able to handle tribulation. Peer pressure is not just something that young people have to endure. Christian adults have to deal with this pressure as well. Many new-born Christians leave the church that led them to Christ as soon as that church comes under attack from someone. It is not easy to endure tribulation. It requires a strong desire to please God more than man. It requires great faith.
6. **Notice that the church had to endure the ridicule from those who claimed to be true followers of God (9b).** As mentioned, the Jews were a big problem for the church in Smyrna. The Lord spoke specifically of these Jews. He said that although these Jews claimed to be Jews, they really weren’t. They certainly did not follow the God of Israel. They were the synagogue (church) of Satan! This church of false Jews spoke blasphemy against Jesus Christ. They spoke out against the church in Smyrna. It’s important for Christians to understand that the strongest persecution and ridicule will often come from those who claim to be religious. While the atheists and secularists certainly hate the true church of Christ, their hate pales in comparison to the hate from false teachers. Satan loves to use religion as a front for his fight against God and His people. Over 65% of this world claims Christianity as their religion, but how few of those truly follow the teachings of Jesus Christ! The church will continue to be the remnant in the world. We must be able to endure ridicule. As the church continues to fall away, the number of true believers will only shrink smaller and smaller.
7. THE CHURCH WAS CHALLENGED TO NOT BE AFRAID OF ITS FUTURE STRUGGLES. (REVELATION 2:10)
8. **Notice that the Lord assured them that they would have further struggles (10).** The worst persecution had not even taken place yet in the church in Smyrna. They were still going to have to endure greater suffering than what had already taken place. When a church is struggling, its members often pray for the Lord to relieve the suffering. Prayer is made for a financial burden to be lifted. Prayer is made for persecution to stop. It’s likely that the members of Smyrna prayed the same prayer. Yet, the Lord told them that the suffering was going to continue. He even gave them some specifics to look forward to. He told them that some were going to be cast into prison and have to endure tribulation for ten days. There are some who think that the ten days represents the ten persecuting Roman emperors and are meant figuratively, but we have no other reason to think that this is figurative since everything else in this portion is to be taken literally. However, if it was meant figuratively, then the persecution was only that much greater. The struggling church cannot take comfort in a false assumption that their struggles are soon to end on this earth, as we do not have any guarantee of that from Scripture.
9. **Notice that the Lord wanted them to have courage in spite of their adversary (10).** They were not going to be thrown into prison by men. Instead, the Lord tells them that the devil himself would be responsible for their imprisonment. The devil is a strong adversary. He has caused many who were weak in faith to faulter and quit. It can be very intimidating to have the forces of Hell fighting against you. Yet, that’s exactly what every church should expect to happen. Our enemy is Satan. He is a hateful enemy. He is a conniving and manipulative enemy. He is a ruthless enemy who will stop at nothing to destroy every Bible-preaching church. Jesus encouraged the church to have courage to resist the devil. He commanded them to fear not. The Bible tells us that greater is He that is in us than He that is in the world. A struggling church can’t be fearful of the enemy. Fear will lead to failure. Fear will lead to making rash and worldly decisions. There have been churches who gave themselves fully over to compromise because they were fearful of the Devil’s attack. Thankfully, the church in Smyrna heeded the Lord’s challenge to stand strong against Satan.
10. THE CHURCH WAS CHALLENGED TO BE FAITHFUL TO THE END. (REVELATION 2:10-11)
11. **Notice that the church was expected to be faithful unto death (10b).** When Jesus addressed the church in verse eight, He referred to Himself as the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive. Jesus was showing how an infinite God even had to face death. If the Alpha and Omega had to endure death, then His followers ought to understand that their battle would be unto death. Yet, Jesus also pointed out to them that death was not final. He was dead but is alive. He encouraged them to be faithful to the end, because the end is not really the end at all. It’s just the start of eternity with Him. There was a crown of life ready for those who willingly gave up their earthly lives for the sake of the cause of Christ.
12. **Notice that the church had already overcome the hurt of the second death (11).** The pain of the second death is much worse than the first. The second death is eternal separation from God. The second death is the pain and agony of Hell. Their faith in Jesus Christ had allowed them to overcome this death. That same faith should be what sustained the church in their darkest days. Jesus told His disciples not to fear those who can hurt the body. They were to fear the One who had power over the soul. When the church has the right perspective, they can overcome any struggle that they might face. We are more than conquerors through Jesus Christ!