

NASB 1977 Smyrna the suffering church

8 *“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write:*

The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this:
9 *‘I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 ‘Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until 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 shall not be hurt by the second death.’*

Every once in a while, you're laying in bed, sleep hasn't happened, and so your mind is at work solving future problems. A couple of nights ago, I was laying there thinking about this letter to this church at Smyrna and thinking, how will I approach it. It's simple to interpret and it's brief.

And as I lay there I thought, I know how to frame this church. And then I prayed, Lord, help me to remember this thought. Because often my mind will solve some problem in semi consciousness and the next day, it's gone. Usually, that's probably a good thing. But I liked the idea about how to look at this church's phenomenon that has caused it to be who it was. And indeed still IS.

This particular church has a rarity about it that we may never experience here. We can talk about it and wonder what it would be like, maybe even be filled with dread worrying about it, but chances are we'll never really find out. Or maybe we will. We're told to consider the cost. Told to be ready for this.

What has happened at Smyrna is that the high cost of being a christian has culled out all but the little group of christians who will die before they will let go of Jesus. Everybody else left. Fled. I didn't sign up for persecution and maybe death! Jesus isn't that important in my life that I would suffer to

keep Him, or worse yet, die. Jesus is just a value added bonus to MY life. I'm not going to die on His hill in His battle.

That language may seem shocking to you. Let me show you a couple of parables that Jesus taught, that show an aspect of this huge canopy that calls itself christian.

Matthew 13:47 *“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea, and gathering fish of every kind; 48 and when it was filled, they drew it up on the beach; and they sat down, and gathered the good fish into containers, but the bad they threw away. 49 “So it will be at the end of the age; the angels shall come forth, and take out the wicked from among the righteous, 50 and will cast them into the furnace of fire; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

So the night thoughts I had about this passage followed ***the basics of the christian faith*** bible study, on Wednesday, because Kirk and Karmin were gone on Monday. Normally it's on Monday's.

And OBTW, all the folks who complain that Jim talks over their heads, that were the driving force of the Basics of the christian faith class, sort of a christian boot camp to get those folks up to speed, none of them were there.

But the lesson, number 12 in the series of 13, was about keeping the commandments. Real christians love Jesus. And if you're real and you love Jesus, you walk differently than this world walks. Jesus insists on it.

Christians have distinctives that set them apart from how the rest of the world lives. Much more so at the end of my life than at the beginning. That christian distinctiveness is a greater contrast now than when I was a child.

As the world progresses, and I'm using that word exactly as the group who calls themselves "progressives", as the world progresses, the distinctiveness, the contrast, of christians from the rest of the world grows

greater and greater.

Christianity, real christianity, is static. It never changes. It's tied to one authoritative truth that has limits on how we live and conduct ourselves in this world, the commandments of God, and Jesus, and if we live according to this book, we become increasingly more distinctly different.

The book never "progresses". Always the same for christians. We live with the same moral constraints now that christians did 2000 years ago, and Hebrews did 3500 years ago.

Or do we? Go to any large metropolitan city and find the mega church with 13,000 members and ask yourself, do they look just like the world around them, or do they live apart from the world according to the distinctives and morals of God's law.

That's what that lesson 12 was about. Christians are different. And getting increasingly more different, more removed, as the world progresses itself away from a sky god with moral authority and limits. Progressing itself into the pit of the "ruler" of this place.

As we were going through that lesson, this parable came into my mind, and showed up later as I thought about this church at Smyrna.

the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea, and gathering fish of every kind; 48 and when it was filled, they drew it up on the beach; and they sat down, and gathered the good fish into containers, but the bad they threw away. 49 "So it will be at the end of the age; the angels shall come forth, and take out the wicked from among the righteous, 50 and will cast them into the furnace of fire; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Mt. 13:47 - 50

This giant canopy that claims to be christian is the dragnet. It scoops up all kinds of fish. Every group that's waving around Jesus in some form or another. Gay church. Catholic church. Mormon church. All the rest of

the collective cults that claim a piece of Jesus in their identity. Evangelicalism en masse. Fundamentalist Bible pounders. Bill Gothard legalists. Everybody. All claiming Jesus to some extent or another.

Listen, the point of that parable is that you can be in the dragnet and rejected from heaven. Only the "christians" and that's in scare quotes folks, only the so called christians who have been regenerated from death to life, who have placed their faith solely in the substitutionary atonement of Jesus death in our place, who have been born again by the indwelling Holy Spirit of God, who are clothed in a righteousness - not their own - will be gathered into the "keep" pile of fish. All the rest get thrown out. And then the language gets scary. Really really thrown out. Furnace of fire in outer darkness thrown out.

Another parable and then we're going to consider the case of the church at Smyrna.

24 He presented another parable to them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. 25 "But while men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares also among the wheat, and went away. 26 "But when the wheat sprang up and bore grain, then the tares became evident also. 27 "And the slaves of the landowner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?' 28 "And he said to them, 'An enemy has done this!' And the slaves said to him, 'Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?' 29 "But he said, 'No; lest while you are gathering up the tares, you may root up the wheat with them. 30 'Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn.'""

With this parable especially, you don't have to sit there and wonder, is Jim getting this right? Jesus explains the parable to His disciples. He tells us exactly what it means.

36 Then He left the multitudes, and went into the house. And His disciples came to Him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field." 37 And He answered and said, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, 38 and the field is the world; and as for the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom; and the tares are the sons of the evil one; 39 and the enemy who sowed them is the devil, and the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are angels. 40 "Therefore just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age. 41 "The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will **gather out of His kingdom** all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, 42 and will cast them into the furnace of fire; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 "Then **THE RIGHTEOUS WILL SHINE FORTH AS THE SUN** in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

The church, at any time in history, in any place in the world, in every culture, is a mixture of true and false believers. Real christians and deluded people who claim to be christians, but are not. X2

There's going to be a lot of surprised people who hear 4 words that I would consider perhaps the 4 scariest words in the Bible. Maybe 7 scary words. ***Depart from Me. I never knew you.***

Matthew 7:21 - 23 "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. 22 "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' 23 "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; **DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.**'

This canopy, this tent, this inclusive multi faceted dragnet that calls itself Christendom, according to statistics, about a third of the 7.5 billion people in the world, claim to be christian. 2.5 billion christians. What if Jesus returns to receive those who belong to Him out of the world at the rapture

and it's only 1.5% of *that* number. 2.5 billion christians and only 37 million depart?

Why would I come up with a number like that? 1.5-2.5% of the claimers, people who identify themselves in some way as christians, seems depressingly low. 15 to 25 true christians out of every 1000 that claim they are christians?

Well if a third of the world's population is christian, we should have 600 people in church this morning. In fact if you consider that the USA is christian friendly and we have a long history of gospel availability in this land, it would make sense that much more of the average of 1/3 world population would be here than in places where the gospel is unknown.

So, where are all these christians. I think the percentage of wheat amongst the tares is pretty dismal. Maybe I'm low at 1.5%, let's go all in and say it's 3%. So then of the 600 - 800 christians that are supposed to be here, in Tonopah, there's actually 15?

Smyrna is unique. And the reason is difficulty and cost. None of the phony's and fake's want to hang around when it brings great difficulty in normal living , and for some, death. That tends to purify the church. Only the real christians stay. Everyone else is outa here. Nope, not what I signed up for.

Some historical background. Of all the churches, Smyrna is perhaps the most beautifully located physically. There has always been human habitation at Smyrna since humans were habitating. It's beyond ancient. They keep finding older and older layers.

And there is a beautiful city there today. Ismir, Turkey. There is a sea chanel that comes 35 miles inland to Ismir. Lovely port with beautiful surrounding hills.

Smyrna had never been conquered by Rome and had premier status in the

Roman empire, because they cooperated with Rome in all things. Including Emperor Worship. Ceasar is God. Keep Rome happy and everyone's happy.

They had to actually get a yearly certificate that they had worshipped Ceasar. It was a yearly requirement. And thus the problem for christians at Smyrna. They would honor and obey Ceasar as ruler and governor but they refused to worhsip him as Deity-King. They had one God, one king; Jesus.

Well, that infuriated Rome under the rule of Domitian. And the good people of Smyrna, wanting to protect their elevated status with Rome, ingratiated themselves to the powers that be at Rome by persecuting the atheists. That's what they called christians. If you won't worship Ceasar, you're an atheist.

Let's look at this letter from Jesus to the poor little rich church. Jesus uses the world's distinction of wealth twice in these letters. Laodicea thought they were rich and in need of nothing and Jesus tells them you are poor and blind and wretched and naked. But Smyrna is bereaved of the worlds wealth, they are in poverty because of Jesus, and He tells them, you are rich.

The worlds wealth is nothing. 5 minutes, and poof, it's gone. Spiritual wealth, treasure in heaven, lasts for all eternity. This letter has only commendation. There is nothing at this church to condemn. At all. Anything worthy of condemnation is purged out because of deep persecution. Cleansing pressure has made them pure. All the tares baled out. They were a sea of beautiful fruitful wheat. No tares.

8“*And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write:*

The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this:

Again, these prologues that identify the author all come from the vision in chapter one, and all have meaning in regards to the specifics that the letter is about. They have a component that speaks specifically to that group's

problems.

To this church, a reminder. You're under horrific pressure and for some, even threat of imminent death as a result of some ruler. Actually the most powerful ruler in the world. Ceasar. All the power of Rome.

Compared to what? You're getting beat up by the worlds most powerful person. But the man who's writing this letter was before . . . anything. And when it's all passed away, He IS. He's before everything and after everything. Ceasar is nothing. A grain of sand on the seashore compared to Jesus.

And this death that he threatens you with. Been there. Done that. Came back to life. I hold that power. Death is no big deal. Ceasar is no big deal. The ONE who has power over death IS a big deal. That's who is speaking to you in this letter.

We can't help ourselves, because this life is all we know. Death?? It seems untenable to us to choose death over separation from a relationship with Jesus. This is all we know. What would my wife do? What would my kids do, if in order to have Jesus, this life is taken away from me?

Jesus reminds us. I was before this world. I'll be after this world. Death is actually a beginning, not an end, if you have Jesus.

9 'I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

I know. ***I know***. Eyes that are flames of fire. Jesus is omniscient. He knows everything. He knows these folks are getting beat up. Stomped on. Crushed, as it were.

Smyrna is the greek word also translated myrrh. The wise men brought gold, frankincense and smyrna. Myrrh is there in the ancient name and still

there in the modern name. Myrrh. Smyrna. Ismir. The jews didn't embalm their dead with formaldehyde. The brought myrrh to overcome the smell of decay with a sweet aroma. Myrrh was a perfume.

To get the aromatic liquid there is a colorful process that bespeaks of exactly what these christians were enduring, and also their fragrant aroma that rose up to heaven in their precious endurance in suffering.

Myrrh comes from Commiphora trees. To get the perfume you wound the tree. You cut a deep incision into the bark, and the tree literally bleeds. A yellow substance comes out and then scabs the wound. It becomes a hard resin over a few weeks. Then you remove the "scab" the resin, and under steam pressure it becomes an aromatic perfume.

It is no coincidence beloved that the church that was being slashed and wounded and crushed was producing a fragrant aroma in heaven and it was in a town called myrrh. Smyrna. Not coincidence, providence. Miracles are easy. God does them at His pleasure, in the moment. Providence takes millenia. A city named myrrh with a church that is being crushed and is giving a lovely aroma in the crushing.

9 'I know your tribulation and your poverty

Interesting how many people you talk to, and their first and immediate response is; Well if He knows, why doesn't He stop it. How is God a just God if He allows injustice. Mr. Justice. That's counterintuitive. Why does God allow evil. Why doesn't he fix all of the injustice in the world.

Why is there horrific evil. Little children bought and sold to be used as slaves and objects of pleasure and then cast off, damaged forever. What God allows that. Horrific evil we don't want to even speak of. Unspeakable things.

Jesus does know. ***Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord. I WILL repay.*** But He's on a different time scheduled priority than we are. Every innocent tear caused by evil will be dealt with. On His time, not ours. To His glory.

Nice to know He knows. Some christians in some land were just murdered, today, perhaps as we speak. Are you writing this down, Jesus? Yes. He knows about every teardrop, every sorrow, every death. Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints.

He is storing up vengeance for every mistreatment of every christian in every time frame, everywhere. He knows.

Jesus is glorified by the suffering and forbearance of His people. If they suffer because of their connection to His name, it is glory. That was one of the first things out of His mouth during His great manifesto, at the sermon on the mount. Everything is backwards in this world, when He owns you and you've been purchased out of this perishing world. Listen to the Beatitudes at the beginning of the sermon on the mount in Matthew 5:1-12. God's kingdom is backwards upside down polar opposite of what this world holds in high regard

1 And when He saw the multitudes, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. 2 And opening His mouth He began to teach them, saying,

3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

5 “Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.

6 “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

7 “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

8 “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

9 “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

*10 “Blessed are **those who have been persecuted** for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 “Blessed are you when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. 12 “Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets who were*

before you.

Everything the world considers a loss, is gain. Everything the world says is a liability to be avoided, is win in God's world, God's kingdom.

Thinking about this; I have very few fears. But this single possibility is something I do think about, something I fear.

Our christian experience has been so easy, so unchallenged. No pressure. Ease. Comfort. The world leaves us alone. My fear is that the cost will come, the challenge, the pressure, that I've never experienced, and I might fail my Lord. I'm a marshmallow. I talk real tough in this pulpit I'm hiding behind. Will we honor Jesus if it please Him to purify His church with testing before He comes. That's something I DO worry about.

These christians at Smyrna were getting spanked. Ultimate pressure. Some were on the list to die. Jesus knows.

9 'I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

tribulation and poverty had made them rich in heaven's equation. Heaven math is not earth math. The world looked at these folks and shook their collective heads. Idiots. Lunatics. They gave up all of the world's wealth, all of the opportunities, everything, for what? Jesus??

The world scoffs at these folks. Moron's. They're ridiculous. Give up the whole world for pie in the sky you can't see. They deserve what they get. Anyone that stupid deserves what they get.

'I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich),

I think to myself, I want to be rich. Like these folks. Rich in heaven's wealth. But then scared-ee-cat me says, be careful what you wish for.

Such a hopeless weak marshmallow. Could I survive a night without a hot shower and a soft bed? A full belly. Oh dear.

and (I know) the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

This ties in perfectly with my introduction. People who are polar opposite of what they say they are. Tares only look like wheat. They aren't. Zealously religious jews at the local synagogue there at Smyrna, but Jesus says, they aren't real jews.

They claim to be jews but they belong to Satan. 1st Synagogue of Satan, Tonopah, NV. That persecution by false religion carried over into christendom. In the first century it was fake jews who persecuted the christians. Today it's fake christians who persecute real ones. Sometimes.

Beloved, if the tidal wave comes, and we're being persecuted, who do you think is going to lead the charge? Answer; People who claim to be christians. Most of the protestant martyrs in Foxe's book of martyrs suffered death at the hands of the Catholic church.

It's mostly self righteous religious people who belong to Satan who kill actual believers. In this case it's zealous religious jews who are bringing harm to the christians at Smyrna. Satan loves to use religion to stamp out the true called out believers.

We just had a stress test with Covid. The world looked on with puzzled amusement as christians attacked christians. Preachers who abandoned their churches calling out the folks who chose to defy the government and deal with the consequences.

It's one thing to have big brother "guvvy" breathing down your neck. Adding fines to your fines, weekly. But then you have the disheartenment of so called christians shouting at you that disobeying Ceasar in order to meet for worship is a great sin. We failed our stress test. What about if

real pressure like these folks were experiencing actually comes here?

10 'Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

How would you like to be the pastor, the messenger, that reads this letter to this church. Tribulation is on it's way. Be faithful . . . unto and including death.

We do in fact have the record of a martyr at Smyrna a few years after this letter was delivered. Polykarp, was their pastor in about 155 AD. 60+ years after this letter was received there.

There is a complete ancient account of this martyr translated into our language and on line if you're curious. A couple of highlights. It was decided that some important christian needed to die in order to appease the Ceasar, and Polycarp, the bishop or pastor at Smyrna was chosen.

He was beloved to all, and the soldiers in charge of delivering him to the accusers pleaded with him to momentarily recant Jesus Christ, and keep his life. What could it possibly matter. From that account, a few lines;

But the proconsul was insistent, and said, "Swear the oath and I will let you go! Revile Christ!"

Polycarp replied, "Eighty-six years I have served him, and he has never wronged me. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" endquote

So they would have nailed him to the stake upon which he was to be burned alive, but he baid them only tie him and His Lord would strengthen him to remain in the fires. And that's what they did.

Beloved, everyone here would join me in stating the desire to be a sweet

aroma to Christ, but we don't much like the idea of being burned at the stake.

10 'Do not fear what you are about to suffer.

This imperative command seems to me to perhaps only be possible in the moment, with miraculous intervention of strength I know I don't have. Outside help to meet the demand of this level of courage that I know I don't possess. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego walked into the fiery furnace. But then the king noticed, there were 4 men in the flames, not 3.

My only possibility of bravery and courage under persecution would be that an extra person was with me, helping me. It's bitter sweet. We desire to be a fragrant aroma, but we recoil from the injury and the bleeding, and the scab, and the beating into a powder, and the steam pressure necessary to become a perfume in God's nostrils. Lord help us if the time comes. We want to be like these folks, but our pastor is a chicken.

Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. Rev. 2:10b

Is that an unrealistic demand. Be faithful to my Name even if it costs you your earthly life.

I guess we need to assess and account the depth of our faith. He died to purchase you. Satan had a hold on your life, a claim, because of sins that you were too bankrupt to repay.

Jesus had to die to purchase you out of that deathgrip. Having purchased you, He now owns you. Your life was never yours. People say my life, my life. No. Sin forfeited your life. Satan owned you because of sin. Jesus bought you. With His shed blood He purchased you.

Paul says to the Corinthians and by default to every christian, you are bought with a price and are not your own. 1 Cor. 6:20 Is it unrealistic that the person who bought you by the shed blood of His death might require

yours?

Our culture is entirely wrapped around the axle of my life, my life. In a godless culture, that's all there is. But in reality revealed to us in this book, this life is 5 minutes long, compared to eternity. A blip in time space continuum. In eternity it's a blink of an eye.

Let's do some math. We were slaves, owned by satan. We couldn't escape our sins that gave us to him. Jesus died to purchase us out of that prison. He owns us. He is all powerful and providential over everything. Even someone requiring our physical death here can only do so if God allows it, and Jesus knows it.

Polycarp, if you read that account, considered it high privilege to be able to die for Jesus name. To exit time space continuum by honoring our Master and King is a great privilege. But, yes, it's scary to think about.

And the answer to the question posed, is it reasonable to require that? Yes, it's reasonable for my Master and King who purchased me at such an impossibly high price, when I was worth nothing, to do with my life as He seems fit.

Paul tells us the trouble here isn't worthy to be compared with the glory that awaits us. Romans 8:18. Do you believe that? May as well do some reckoning now, than later. Count the cost.

Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

I have no idea what that is. Will martyrs in heaven have a special crown that only they get? Perhaps. But we will cast those crowns at His feet in worship. Heaven won't be two tiered. Haves and have nots. Any crown I might have to cast at His feet, He actually did it, not me.

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

How interesting that at the beginning of His earthly ministry in the portion of the sermon on the mount that we read, Jesus says this exact same thing, and it's also the last thing He says to His church. Listen to the book. Get this book flowing in your veins like blood.

Then when the proconsul comes and says, come with me to the stake you'll die on unless you recant Jesus, you'll be ready. Listen. Hear. The Spirit wrote the book. Listen to it. Hear it.

Those who die IN Christ then enjoy Him for eternity. No second death will ever remove you from Him. All others, the second death is eternity in the lake of fire. This life is 5 minutes long. Listen to Him.