

«Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life»

The most necessary message for the Church today

The church in Smyrna is the only one, along with Philadelphia, that does not receive any admonition or warning. Only words of encouragement and hope are spoken by the Lord. It was an exemplary congregation. And we wonder intrigued what was the secret of its good spiritual health?

The answer is as simple as it is difficult to apply: **its attitude towards suffering**. They were one piece Christians, whole and upright. For this reason they were willing to pay the price for following Christ to the end. They were tested and approved. Suffering as Christian is certainly hard, but it has a cleansing, purifying effect on our faith (1 Pet. 1:6-7). Therefore, the Lord's message to this church is very relevant for us today when the people of God throughout the world (including the *free* West) have to face marked anti-Christian hostility.

The believers in Smyrna were going through great tribulation. Opposition and persecution from the influential Jewish community had led them into poverty; they had suffered the plunder of their properties and other forms of injustice. And yet the Lord tells them: «*I know your poverty, **but you are rich***» (Rev. 2:9 NIV). What a divine paradox! They were ruined, but they were rich in Christ, «as having nothing, yet possessing everything» (2 Cor. 6:10 NIV).

In the midst of this extremely difficult situation -and with the prospect announced by the Lord himself that it was going to get worse- they receive a promise, a jewel for Christians of all times: «Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life» (Rev. 2:10 NIV).

We are facing one of the most *memorized* verses in the entire Bible, but it should also be one of the most *internalized*, we must make it ours whenever necessary. How to achieve it?

Let us observe how the promise is framed by a **broader exhortation to perseverance and fidelity**: «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... The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death» (Rev. 2:10-11 NIV).

The inspired text shows us the keys to this perseverance:

1. Courage: «Do not fear anything»

The Christian life is a fight not fit for cowards. The first thing the believers in Smyrna had to hear was the same one that the patriarchs and prophets heard: **do not fear**. These words contain both encouragement and an exhortation to effort and courage. It is also an absolute, emphatic exhortation: «do not fear **anything**» (Rev. 2:10 EHV). There is no room for exceptions: “Nothing to fear” is the motto of the faithful believer.

2. A correct view of the present tribulation

At the time of trial, it is very important to remember some fundamental facts in their most literal sense: they are the foundation, the ground that sustains us and prevents us from collapsing. They have to do with *the origin* and *the duration* of the trial.

As to its **origin, the test comes from Satan**: «Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested» (Rev. 2:10 NIV). There is no reason to accuse God and blame him for the situation. A careful reading of the book of Acts shows us how active the enemy of our souls is, and how much he opposes the progress of the Gospel. This spiritual battle is all the more intense as the more flourishing the testimony of the believer (or the church) is, the light of the congregation in Smyrna was too disturbing.

As for its **duration, the test is limited**. Suffering and persecution always have a date of expiry. The expression «for ten days» (Rev. 2:10 NIV) reminds us that no one but the Almighty God has the last word. There will be an “*eleventh day*”, the day when the tribulation will end. Now we live in a world of evil, but not without control; a world with darkness, but not without hope.

The church of Smyrna was going to suffer the martyrdom of its pastor, Polycarp, a direct disciple of John, burned at the stake. But this martyrdom appears today as one of the most exemplary pages in the Church History. The direct testimony of Polycarp, full of shocking details, is like a flag of faith that waves in history for our encouragement. Indeed, in trial, more than anywhere else, we discover the power of God to *transform adversities into opportunities*. God is a specialist in *recycling* bad situations and turning them into good. In the words of Paul, «for those who love God all things work together for good» (Rom. 8:28 NIV).

3. The guarantee of the risen Christ: «I know»

The way that the message to the church in Smyrna begins is particularly meaningful. Christ introduces himself as the risen one: **«The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life»** (Rev. 2:8 NIV). A unique introductory card that does not occur on any of the other letters! It's not by chance. **The power of the risen Christ is what the suffering church needed –and needs– most.**

Christ's victory on the cross and his resurrection guarantee us that **He is for and with us**. The statement «I know your tribulation...» (Rev. 2:9 NIV) does not refer to a merely *informative* knowledge, but an *experiential* one because «in all their affliction He was afflicted» (Isa. 63:9 NIV). The awareness of Christ's presence at our side transforms everything.

We are impressed to find out that the lighthouse of the church of Smyrna has never been turned off to this day. The flame of the Gospel lives on in modern Izmir. What a challenge and what a powerful encouragement for us today! Its “secret” is ours as well: the desire to *live for Christ* brings forth a willingness to *suffer for Christ* because «a servant is not greater than his master» (John 13:16 NIV). But we are not alone nor do we struggle without hope. The persecuted church today -and every disciple of Christ- take courage and go forth strengthened by the luminous words of the Risen One. His powerful yet tender words resonate in our hearts: **«Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life»**. No doubt, the most necessary message for the Church today.

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The web **Christian Thought** gives information about the literary work of Dr. Pablo Martínez and his father Rev. José M. Martínez. Through this work the Christian thought of the authors flows covering a wide range of subjects; theological, psychological and ethical issues are considered from a biblical perspective with a relevant and practical application to current problems.

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