

Transition

Looking back to the vision of 1:9-20, Jesus directs the Smyrneans to verses 17-18 for encouragement.

1. He is the eternal God.

First (*protos*) and the last (*eschatos*): used of Yahweh in Isaiah 44:6; 48:12. This emphasizes both His eternality and His sovereignty. He is eternal God. This persecuted people needed to know He knows what is happening and that He is allowing it to happen. He is the eternal one, a title related to time.

2. He is the resurrected Lord.

This is a title related to life. He suffered, He died, and He lived again! Their Lord, the sovereign, eternal God was subject to rejection, persecution and death. But He won, He conquered. Like their Savior, they may be rejected, persecuted and even die, and like their Master they too will be victorious. He lives! He is with them. He knows all that they are experiencing.

“Every year for 20 years missionary Graham Staines of Australia conducted five-day open-air “jungle camps” in villages of the eastern Indian state of Orissa. After a meeting on January 23, 1999, the 58-year-old Staines and his two sons, 10-year-old Philip and 7-year-old Timothy, were sleeping in a vehicle parked outside a local church when militant Hindus doused the vehicle with gasoline and set it afire. “My husband and sons tried to get out of the burning vehicle, but were stopped by the attackers,” Staines wife, Gladys recounts. As the flames engulfed the vehicle, the mob danced and some shouted, “Justice has been done; the Christians have been cremated in Hindu fashion.” The mob kept would-be rescuers at bay for more than an hour until making sure the missionary and his sons had died. Staines, secretary of the Evangelical Missionary Society, an independent missionary organization based in Brisbane, had been operating a hospital and clinic for lepers for 34 years. Two days after the murders, lepers dug the graves for the family while Gladys Staines consoled them as they wept. “God has given me peace, and I have never questioned his wisdom in allowing this tragedy,” Gladys Staines said after the tragedy. “These people are my people and I hope to stay here.” (*Christianity Today*, 3-1-99). Gladys and her 13-year-old daughter Esther, have stayed. *World Magazine* reported on November 6, 1999 that Gladys said, “I am terribly upset but not angry. My husband loved Jesus Christ who has taught us to forgive our enemies”(p.16). It is a living resurrected Lord we need when times like this land on us.

II. The church is commended for its dedication. 2:9-10

The word Smyrna means myrrh, which was a sweet perfume used to embalm dead bodies. As a gift from the Magi, (Matt. 2:11), he was prophetic of the suffering and death Jesus would experience. This city had a history of suffering. Now that lot was cast upon the church. By all outward signs she was weak and poor. **BUT REMEMBER:** looks can be deceiving. Upon careful inspection by the Lord, we find a strong and wealthy people, at least as Jesus sees things.

1. We must accept sacrifice. 2:9

- Tribulation (affliction) – the pressures you are experiencing and the opposition you are facing. I know. I know the burden that crushes.
- Poverty – extreme, abject poverty. Linking tribulation and poverty suggests the two are related. Economic destitution was the result of the opposition they experienced. It cost them to take a stand for Jesus, yet they stood. And because they stood Jesus makes an amazing statement: “you are rich.” Materially they had nothing, but spiritually they had everything. People on earth mocked them as paupers, but God in heaven honored them as winners (see verse 10). James 2:5 says “God has chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith.” When it came to whose opinion mattered most, the church at Smyrna said we will go with Jesus. Poor on earth, but rich in heaven!

2. We will be attacked by Satan. 2:9

Blasphemy – slander

Synagogue of Satan - Romans 2:28-29

“For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.”

These were descendants of Abraham by physical birth but not spiritual birth. In John 8:44 we find words quite similar as Jesus said of those unbelieving Jews, “You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do.” Physical heritage is no indication of spiritual standing! Hostile and bent on persecuting the followers of Christ, these Jews were tools of the evil one. Satan is Hebrew and means adversary. Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 provide some insight, by way of typology of his fall. (He is mentioned in Rev. 2:9-10, 13; 3:9; 9:11; 12:9-10, 12; 13:4; 20:2, 7, 10.)

*Is There A
DEVIL?*

The DEVIL, or Satan, has been around a long, long time. *Life* magazine once rightly called the devil “the longest-lived villain in history.” Christians did not invent the devil. Long before Christianity, the devil was being portrayed as a fallen angel in Greek, Egyptian and Hindu mythologies. Christians, however, trace their belief in the devil to the Bible, not ancient myth. The New Testament especially depicts him as the unseen instigator of evil, the archenemy of God and man. But something unexpected happened to the devil in the centuries after the New Testament Church was established. Over the years he underwent a strange metamorphosis. By the Middle Ages, superstitious and demon-dreading Europeans had transformed the biblical devil into a grotesque physical caricature. Connecting evil with physical ugliness, religious people increasingly pictured the devil as a repulsive mixture of monstrous body parts. Eventually, he acquired a forked tail, a cloven hoof, pitchfork and horns. By modern times, the devil had become a laughable cartoon figure in the popular imagination. Meanwhile, some more educated people changed the devil into a convenient literary metaphor for evil. According to the Bible, the devil was the angel Lucifer – the Shining One or Light-bearer (Isaiah 14:12). His pride led him to rebel against God and become Satan, the Prince of Darkness. The Bible says the devil and his demons exercise power over the nations. The apostle John, when writing about the devil, said the “whole world is under the control of the evil one” (I John 5:19). Revelation says he “leads the whole world astray: (Revelation 12:9). Paul told the Christians at Ephesus that they had once followed “the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient” (Ephesians 2:2). The apostle Paul said, “The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers” (II Corinthians 4:4). The devil has been at this deception game from earliest times. He is experienced in seducing people into doing his bidding without them being aware of it. Temptation continues to be the devil’s most powerful weapon (I Corinthians 7:5). That’s why the Bible identifies him as the tempter (I Thessalonians 3:5). Satan roams among God’s people, Scripture warns. He tries to ravish the spiritually unprepared. “Be self-controlled and alert,” wrote Peter (I Peter 5:8). Why? Because, he continued, “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith” (verses 8-9). God in Jesus Christ came in human flesh “to destroy the devil’s work” (I John 3:8). Jesus promised that Satan the devil would one day be permanently condemned (John 12:31).

3. We can anticipate suffering. 2:10

Do not fear – stop fearing (*me* with the imperative); it may indicate an already present atmosphere of fear (cf. Matthew 10:28).

About to suffer – he warns them: it is coming

- Some to prison

Tested – to show where their loyalty is

to show how strong their faith is

to show how great their love for Jesus is

Tribulation ten days – 1) ten literal days 2) symbolic for a limited period of time 3) representative of 10 specific periods of Roman persecution from Nero A.D. 54 to Diocletian in A.D. 284. View #2 is best.

- God allowed it
- God limited it → He is in control.

III. The church is challenged by its destiny. 2:10-11

This church has no word of correction. In this regard it and Philadelphia are unique and worthy of honor. Men may kill the body but they cannot destroy the soul. Men may kill the body and in the process immediately usher us into the presence of Jesus. What do we have to fear?!

1. We will receive a crown for our faith. 2:10

Be faithful until death. Like Graham, Philip and Timothy Staines we may die. But Graham's wife, and Philip and Timothy's mother, puts it all in perspective, "sometimes the pain is very deep, but I believe my husband and sons have gone to heaven. There is hope that this is not the end. I am going to see them again" (*Baptist Press*, 1-28-00).

Yes we will see them again and they ... they now see Jesus who honors them with a "crown (*stephanos*) of life." No earthly persecution or death can rob the child of God of their priceless eternal reward.

Note the crowns:

Crown of life (Rev. 2:10; also James 1:12)

Crown of righteousness (2 Tim. 4:8)

Crown of glory (I Peter 5:4)

Crown of gold (Rev. 4:4)

Crown of rejoicing (I Thess. 2:19)

Crown of corruption (I Cor. 9:25)

Men may thrust a spear through our heart but God will put a crown on our head!

2. We will overcome the second death. 2:11

Hear – (imperative)

Churches – (plural)

Overcomers – (I John 5:4-5)

Second Death – (cf. Rev. 20:6, 14; 21:8). This is spiritual death, eternal death. It is not annihilation but permanent, conscience separation from the living God in Hell, the Lake of Fire. It is an eternal punishing which the overcomer will not experience. John uses a double negative ... “The overcomer no not will be hurt by the second death.”

Conclusion

His name was Polycarp. He served as the pastor, the bishop of Smyrna. He had been a disciple of John and was greatly loved and respected by the churches. However the citizens of Smyrna did not hold him with the same esteem. In A.D. 155 the authorities sought his arrest. Events moved quickly and what follows is the record of his death, the oldest account of a Christian dying for Jesus outside the New Testament.

“Now the most admirable Polycarp, when he first heard the news, was not disturbed. In fact, he wanted to remain in town, but the majority persuaded him to withdraw. So he withdrew to a farm not far distant from the city. And as those who were searching for him persisted, he moved to another farm. Mounted police and horsemen, closing in on him late in the evening, found him in bed in an upstairs room in a small cottage; and though he still could have escaped from there to another place, he refused, saying, “May God’s will be done.” After transferring him to their carriage and sitting down at his side, they tried to persuade him, saying, “Why, what harm is there in saying, ‘Caesar is Lord,’ and offering incense” (and other words to this effect) “and thereby saving yourself?” Now at first he gave them no answer. But when they persisted, he said, “I am not about to do what you are suggesting to me.” He was led to the stadium. There was such a tumult in the stadium that no one could even be heard. But as Polycarp entered the stadium, there came a voice from heaven: “Be strong, Polycarp, and act like a man.” And no one saw the speaker, but those of our people who were present heard the voice. The proconsul tried to persuade him to recant, saying, “Have respect for your age,” and other such things as they are accustomed to say. When the magistrate persisted and said, “Swear the oath, and I will release you; revile Christ,” Polycarp replied, “For eighty-six years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” So the proconsul said: “I have wild beasts; I will throw you to them, unless you change your mind.” But he said: “Call for them!” The he said to him again: “I will have you consumed by fire, since you despise the wild beasts, unless you change your mind.” But Polycarp said: “You threaten with a fire that burns only briefly and after just a little while is extinguished, for you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment, which is reserved for the ungodly. But why do you delay? Come, do what you wish.”

The proconsul was astonished, and sent his own herald into the midst of the stadium to proclaim three times: "Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian." When this was proclaimed by the herald, the entire crowd, Gentiles as well as Jews living in Smyrna, cried out with uncontrollable anger and with a loud shout: "This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our gods, who teaches many not to sacrifice or worship." The crowd swiftly collected wood and kindling from the workshops and baths, the Jews being especially eager to assist in this, as is their custom. Then the materials prepared for the pyre were placed around him; and as they were also about to nail him, he said: "Leave me as I am; for he who enables me to endure the fire will also enable me to remain on the pyre without moving, even without the sense of security which you get from the nails." So they did not nail him, but tied him instead. Then he, having placed his hands behind him and having been bound, looked up to heaven and said: "O Lord God Almighty, Father of your beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, through whom we have received knowledge of you, the God of angels and powers and of all creation, and of the whole race of the righteous who live in your presence, I bless you because you have considered me worthy of this day and hour, that I might receive a place among the number of the martyrs in the cup of your Christ, to the resurrection to eternal life, both of soul and of body, in the incorruptibility of the Holy Spirit. May I be received among them in your presence today, as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, as you have prepared and revealed beforehand, and have now accomplished, you who are the undecieving and true God. For this reason, indeed for all things, I praise you, I bless you, I glorify you, through the eternal and heavenly High Priest, Jesus Christ, your beloved Son, through whom to you with him and the Holy Spirit be glory both now and for the ages to come. Amen." When he had offered up the "Amen" and finished his prayer, the men in charge of the fire lit the fire."