

THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF ASIA

The Church Where Saints Would Suffer
Program #1048

Eddie Parrish & Mark Teske

EDDIE: There's not anything in this world better than the blessings of Christianity. The promises of future blessings, as well as the existence of present ones, are those things that enable us to endure when hard times come. Jesus once told one of His churches about some coming difficulties, and we're going to study that today on *The Truth In Love*.

EDDIE: Thank you for joining us today, and welcome to each of you. We're glad to have you as a part of *The Truth In Love* program today. Along with Mark Teske, who's the executive director of *The Truth In Love* program, I'm Eddie Parrish, and we're glad to have you as a part of our study of God's word today. We're right in the middle of a series of lessons from Revelation chapters 1– 3 and the seven churches of Asia.

MARK: As we talked about with these churches, there were seven letters written to seven churches, again, not covering every church in the province of Asia, but covering seven of them, with seven being the symbolic number for completeness. As we look at these churches, we can see some things about them that very possibly are present in the places where we worship. At the end of each of these letters, we read, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." And that again shows the applicability of many of these concepts to us today.

EDDIE: Yes. We looked last week at the first of these letters, the one to the church in Ephesus, where Jesus had a number of positive things to say about that congregation. He spoke about their desire to hold fast to the truth, their toil, their labor, their patience, and a lot of things that were positive, but He also said, "You have left your first love." He had some negative things to say. And from Ephesus, He then turns to address the church in Smyrna. That begins in Revelation 2:8–11. I hope you have your Bible with you and can look at these passages along with us. Smyrna, as far as the city itself is concerned, was located about 40 miles north of the city of Ephesus. It was a very beautiful city. As a matter of fact, one historian referred to it as the ornament of Asia. So it evidently had a lot of aesthetic qualities. The city was at one time honored by the city of Rome because of its strong support of emperor worship back during the days of the Roman empire. It was a very important city. It was a port city, so there was a lot of trade that happened in Smyrna. There was also a large Jewish population there. There was a synagogue of the Jews located in the city, and there was also a congregation of the Lord's people, a church that belonged to Christ. One of the interesting things, Mark, about this particular letter is that with Ephesus, for example, which we studied last time, there was commendation and then condemnation, or something bad said about the congregation. With Smyrna, there's no condemnation.

MARK: The things that are said about them truly are very positive about their actions, but the negative side we see in this letter is the fact that they need to be ready, because there are some things that are ahead for them that are not really that pleasant, but things they need to be aware of. As we consider this book and the applicability to us today, we don't have letters coming from heaven telling us when persecutions are coming, but the concepts that we have here really do help us prepare ourselves and our congregations for persecution that's on the road ahead of us.

EDDIE: Yes. Jesus wants them to be very much aware of the fact that persecution is coming. And in general, persecution comes for anybody who's going to be faithful, and we'll probably talk about that a little bit later. As we begin looking at this particular letter that Jesus dictated to John, beginning in verse 8, Jesus identifies Himself as the

materials as well. We have a booklet entitled *From My Heart To Yours*, written by a faithful gospel preacher, Maxie Boren. You can request that as well. We'll be glad to send that to you free of charge. And we hope that you'll join us again next time as we continue this series of lessons.

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signified completeness, but an indefinite period of time. In other words, He's not literally saying ten days. It's indefinite as far as the actual length of it, but it would be a sufficient length of time.

MARK: And it's going to come to an end. It's going to have an ending point.

EDDIE: Absolutely. He says they will have to endure this. Sometimes trials are removed, and sometimes they're not. And He said in this case they would have to suffer this tribulation.

MARK: James says in James 1:2-4 that there is some benefit to us going through the suffering and going through the trials and tribulation. It can be a benefit. God isn't forsaking us by allowing us to go through that, because we do get some benefit from it.

EDDIE: Right. Then He says with a promise, "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life." He said you don't have to be popular, you don't have to be wealthy, you don't have to be loved by everybody, you don't have to be good-looking, (something that I'm personally thankful for that we don't have to be). But He says you can be, and must be faithful. Be faithful even to the point of death, if need be, and I will give you the crown of life, and you'll not be hurt by the second death. Things are not always pleasant when we're trying to live faithfully. Tribulations and trials will come if we're trying to do the Lord's will, but from the church at Smyrna and from what Jesus said to them, if we can maintain our loyalty to Christ and maintain our faithfulness to Him and to His word, we have the promise of One who Himself is the first and the last, raised from the dead, One who knows us and knows our tribulation, that He'll be there to help us through it, and when all is said and done, we'll receive the crown of life. We thank you for watching our program today, and we want to offer you a copy of the program on cassette tape, CD or DVD. Any of those are free to you if you'll just contact us and let us know that you'd like this lesson or this series of lessons on the seven churches of Asia. Our mailing address is P.O. Box 865, Hurst, Texas, 76053. We also have an e-mail address, requests@thetruthinlove.com, or you can order copies of the program from our website, www.thetruthinlove.com. We have written

One from whom this letter is coming, and He does that with each of the letters to these particular congregations. He identifies Himself with some kind of terminology or imagery, much of which is borrowed from the imagery that we looked at in Revelation 1 in past programs. But He identifies Himself here, first of all, as the first and the last. There are a number of Old Testament references in the book of Revelation and allusions to Old Testament passages or events, and there are a couple of places in the book of Isaiah specifically, where this same terminology about being the first and the last is used with reference to God, with God referring to Himself in those terms.

MARK: Yes. In Isaiah 44:6, "Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of Hosts, I am the first and I am the last. Besides me, there is no God." Again, we clearly have deity referencing Himself as the first and the last.

EDDIE: Yes. Isaiah 48:12 is another of those passages. "Listen to me, oh, Jacob and Israel, my called. I am He, I am the first, I am also the last." And in those passages, specifically in the context of those passages in Isaiah, God was wanting to remind His people that He was the only true God. There was no other God besides Him. Therefore, their allegiance was to be to Him. He was the only eternal one. He was the only one that possessed those divine attributes. No other so-called god could overpower Him. I think those same applications could be, should have been, and no doubt were applied by the Christians in Smyrna to themselves as far as their relationship to God was concerned. They knew that God was the first and the last, no one could beat or overpower Him, and that should have eased some of their fears.

MARK: Yes. They had persecution ahead of them, and knowing that God was indeed in control, and in charge would be a very comforting thought. It's kind of ironic that as we consider the context of the period of time in which these letters were written, there was intense persecution by the Roman empire that had been going on, and would continue to go on with respect to the church. And in light of all that persecution, I could very well see a Christian in that day, especially in view of suffering, saying, "Where is God? Where is He during all

this?" It would be so easy to be discouraged and not know how He's running things and how He's in control. But the reminder that He is indeed the first and last, and He is the only God would be quite reassuring to them, as it is to us as well.

EDDIE: Yes. Indeed, it no doubt was to them. With persecution comes fear. And it would have helped them to know that they were serving the all-powerful One. In addition to that, He not only describes Himself as the first and the last, the eternal One, and the only true divine God, but He also refers to Himself as the One who was dead and then came to life. And that, of course, takes us back again to Revelation 1:18, where Jesus described Himself as the One who was alive and then dead, and now alive forevermore. If persecution in the lives of these Christians would ultimately lead to their deaths (and He'll make that allusion in a couple of verses), they still had reason to hope, because the Lord that they served was One who Himself had been killed, but His body did not stay in the ground. It was raised from the dead. And His resurrection gives us hope in our future resurrection.

MARK: Paul said something very similar in the Thessalonian letter. In I Thessalonians 4:13, he said, "I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren...lest you sorrow as others who have no hope." But because Jesus has been raised from the dead, we have that hope before us. We can indeed take some comfort in times that would otherwise lead us to despair.

EDDIE: Yes. And who better to be able to help a group of persecuted people to endure that persecution than Jesus Himself who endured the ultimate persecution in His own life? We see in the book of Hebrews, where our attention is called to the fact that Jesus is able to sympathize with us, (Hebrews 4:15) because of His having lived on this earth and endured persecution. We also see in Hebrews 2:18, "For in that He Himself" (Jesus), "has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted." As Jesus prepares to address the persecution that's going to come in the direction of these Christians at Smyrna, He is laying an excellent foundation of principles that will help to support them in their persecution by simply referring to Himself in these terms. I'm the first and the last, there's no other

through Me," (John 14:6). The people who were persecuting these Christians were claiming to be something that they were not. They were claiming to be children of God and thought that they were acting as such, but Jesus says in reality, they are not a synagogue of His or a synagogue of God, but instead they are a synagogue of Satan. And that would be true of anybody who would oppose what's right. That would be true of anybody who would oppose Christ, His work and His people, Christians. Like you say, it's not popular terminology, but the Bible speaks, and what we try to do is to speak where the Bible speaks, with malice toward no one. But reality is reality and truth is truth. These are certainly the things that Jesus said about the people who were persecuting Christians in the city of Smyrna.

MARK: By the time of the writing of this letter in the late part of the first century, Jerusalem had been destroyed. The temple was gone forever. Judaism, as God prescribed it in the Old Testament, could no longer be practiced. The sacrificial system, the proving of the lineage for the priesthood, and all of those records were destroyed in AD 70 with the destruction of the temple. So true Old Testament Judaism as per the law of Moses recorded in Scripture was no longer possible to occur. Those who were claiming to be Jews were in fact not accepting the whole point of Judaism, which was Jesus is the Christ. They also were no longer practicing the Judaism of the Old Testament, and as a result, they're called the synagogue of Satan because of the persecution of the church.

EDDIE: It had been nailed to the cross, to use the terminology of Paul in Colossians 2:14. We have much to cover, and we're running short of time, so we'll try to cover verses 10 and 11 rather quickly here. He says to them not to fear or be terrified about the things that they are about to suffer. Satan was going to be behind this additional coming persecution that was going to be a part of their lives. He was going to throw some of them into prison. It is interesting that He says Satan is going to be responsible for this. But there will be people who will be carrying out his wishes. Some will be thrown into prison, "and you will have tribulation ten days," He says (Revelation 2:10). This is another of those figurative things. Ten (and multiples of it) was sometimes a number that was similar to the number seven in that it

Barnabas, and expelled them from their region." Acts 17:13 makes a similar statement about a Jewish element from Thessalonica which came down and persecuted Paul because of the things that he was teaching. Those statements are not racially motivated or anything like that. They are just statements of reality. Paul was preaching that Jesus Christ was the Messiah and the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, and there were some among the Jewish people who did not accept that and did not accept the Messiahship and deity of Christ, and so they persecuted early Christians. There's some terminology that's interesting in the New Testament, where God, in these inspired books would take some Old Testament terminology and make New Testament or Christian, if you will, applications of some of that terminology, like the term Jew. Paul said in Romans 2:28-29, "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." In Galatians 3:29 Paul would say, "If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." Paul said those who are of the true circumcision, (another Jewish reference) are those who have faith in Christ or who trust in Christ, (Philippians 3:3). So it seems that what Jesus is saying here is that there were those of that disposition in Smyrna who were claiming to be the people of God based on their ethnic blood background, and He is saying because they're persecuting you as Christians, that's really not in reality what they are. They're not truly children of God.

MARK: As we look at that, obviously the way it's presented is not anti-Semitic. It's just circumstantially that these are the folks who happen to be persecuting. But they're doing the devil's work in persecuting the church. As we look at this and bring it forward to today, there's persecution that comes, and we can see how Jesus considers that and what His feeling is toward it. He said it is blasphemous and He uses very strong intolerant wording. In our day, the wording that he uses might be viewed as being non-politically correct, but it's from the mouth of Jesus Himself, so it is proper and correct.

EDDIE: Yes. It was Jesus who said, without apology or anything, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except

besides Me, nobody's more powerful than I am, I'm the One that's been raised from the dead, and One who suffered as well but came through it victorious. So He's already laying a wonderful foundation to give them support, hope and help in the days ahead, when they'll be persecuted.

MARK: It is comforting to have that leader (the role of headship that Jesus has over the church), saying basically, I've been there, I've done that, I've been victorious. That's how He refers to Himself. Then we have Him looking at the church itself, and once again, He says those words that we talked about before, "I know about you." And we see the intimate knowledge that He has of the church there at Smyrna.

EDDIE: Right. In Revelation 2:9, He says, "I know your works, tribulation and poverty, (but you are rich), and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan." And as He did to Ephesus in the first letter, He gives them a commendation. He finds characteristics about them that are commendable. And He wants them to know what those are. Sometimes in our periods of distress and trial, and when things aren't going the way that we'd like for them to go (as Mark mentioned earlier), it's easy for us to adopt an attitude that says, "Where's God in all this?" And we sometimes feel like we're all alone, like Elijah did in I Kings 19. When he was fleeing from Queen Jezebel, God came to him while he was hiding in a cave, and He said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah said, "They've killed Your prophets. I alone am left, and they seek to take my life," (I Kings 19:13-14). Elijah had the mentality that he was all by himself. But God's answer to him then was, "You're not alone. There are still 7,000 that haven't bowed the knee to Baal." And even if those 7,000 didn't exist, God was still there. That's one of the points that the church in Smyrna no doubt should have taken from this, that regardless of their circumstances, Jesus says in this letter, "I know your works." Jesus continued to know their situation and their circumstances and that, no doubt, had to be comforting to them.

MARK: Yes. The suffering that we go through is always better when you have somebody there. And we understand that. When somebody is terribly sick in the hospital, what do we do? We go and visit them.

When somebody's grieving the loss of a loved one, just our mere presence is a great comfort. And knowing that God is there is comforting for us, as we look at the suffering which He warns them about here in this letter.

EDDIE: Yes. Specifically concerning the things that He says He knows about them, He tells them, "I know your tribulation." That word literally carries the idea of being squeezed, or pressured. In the first century, there was a lot of pressure that would come to Christians from many different sources. The empire of Rome, for example, if you were known to be a Christian and did not bow to the emperor or cater to the worship of the emperor, could have done a lot of things to you that were unpleasant. You could be marked in a certain way so that people knew who you were and knew that you were a Christian, and you could have property confiscated. People would not give you business in whatever businesses you might have been in, and that could hurt you. So there were a lot of things that would pressure and squeeze Christians in ways that would tempt them to compromise truth and to compromise their loyalty and allegiance to Christ. In a very similar way, we get pressured, too. People today want us to relax Biblical standards and things like that. But Jesus told Smyrna, "I know your tribulation," (Revelation 2:9). He knew how they were squeezed and the pressure they were under.

MARK: One thing talked about in modern day is the idea of our need to be tolerant, which clearly goes against the teaching, yet that's the pressure and squeeze we feel today. And when we look in context here at the church in Smyrna, we can see evidence that they were squeezed financially and were in extreme poverty. As you mentioned, very possibly this is the result of the mere fact that they were Christians, and that people were marking them and avoiding their businesses, and in that way persecuting them for the sake of Christ.

EDDIE: Yes. But in talking about their poverty, He quickly adds in this commendation that, yes, I know your poverty, and that no doubt had to do with financial pressures that were put on them, maybe similar to what was said to the recipients of the letter of Hebrews, where the writer said in Hebrews 10:34, You "joyfully accepted the

plundering of your goods." Sometimes that would happen to people who were faithful. But He says, even though I know your poverty, you're rich. And they were rich in areas that really counted. Financial things are not necessarily the best things. God has always placed a higher emphasis on spiritual wealth than He has on material wealth.

MARK: As the apostle Paul mentions in Ephesians 1:3, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places." And we see that great blessing. One thing that often helps me to understand and really appreciate is to ask the question, "A million years after your death, when you're in eternity, will it really matter? Will how much money you had in your bank account really matter?" A million years into eternity, it hasn't even started, and at that point, the brief period of time that we were here on this earth will seem so small and insignificant. The true riches that they had are things that, when we have the proper perspective on life, can really help us to understand and push forward through difficult times.

EDDIE: Yes. "One's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses," Jesus said in Luke 12:15. And it's possible for us to be rich materially but not be "rich toward God," (Luke 12:21). So though Smyrna may have been materially poor, they were rich in God's eyes, and that's all that mattered. And that should be all that matters to us. If you are not wealthy materially, that doesn't mean that you can't be faithful to God, and it doesn't mean that God is somehow displeased with you. God is interested in your spiritual condition and in the condition of your soul. That's certainly evident with the church in Smyrna. Jesus also says, concerning the things that He's aware of, "I know the blasphemy," (literally, the slander), "of those who say they are Jews, and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan," (Revelation 2:9). There the Lord uses interesting terminology. These are people who claim to be Jews, but are actually a part of a synagogue, not a synagogue of the Jews, but a synagogue of Satan. It is interesting that early on in the history of the church, there was a lot of hostility toward Christians from a Jewish element. The New Testament is clear on that. Acts 13:50 mentions that the Jews "stirred up the devout and prominent women and the chief men of the city, raised up persecution against Paul and