

THRU THE BIBLE EXPOSITION

Revelation: God's Revelation To His Servants Today On Events About To Occur

Part III: "The Things Which Are": Church History

B. Smyrna: Message To The Persecuted Church - Staying Faithful To Christ Under Persecution (Revelation 2:8-11)

Introduction: (To show the need . . .)

Though we could hope that religious persecution were only a thing of the past, it is a very real issue today:

(1) Drew Hinshaw with Emmanuel Tumanjong, in their article, "Boko Haram's Soaring Toll in Trauma" in The Wall Street Journal, May 31-June 1, 2014, p. A9, told how the Islamist insurgency has left "anguished survivors" in Maiduguri, Nigeria. There, "soldiers and suspected Boko Haram members alike" exhibit "symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder . . . 'Some of them will tell you that they killed even their parents.'"

(2) Here in America, even conservative Christians are increasingly concerned about facing persecution: on June 2, 2014, I heard "The Talk of Connecticut" radio show promote the coming of Dan Brown to Hartford for a fundraiser for the Mark Twain House. Brown's book, The DaVinci Code has sold so many copies it has put him in demand for such events. Nevertheless, Paul L. Maier, Professor of History claimed "The DaVinci Code is . . . packed with historical error, deception, and falsehood, as well as outright hostility to the truths of Christianity" and David Neff, Editor & Vice-President of Christianity Today asserted that "the book's hidden agenda" is "to transform the very character of the Christian faith." (Forward credits in Darrell L. Bock's work, Breaking The DaVinci Code, 2004)

(3) However, "soft" persecution that comes from within the Church itself, is rampant today: (a) Brannon Howse, Religious Trojan Horse, 2012, p. 1-13 who warns of the infiltration of false teachers in evangelical circles, wrote of the great opposition he faces from professing Christian leaders for exposing errant teachers. (b) Such "soft" persecution occurs locally, too: I have often heard other pastors and even believers in the pew who teach and live the Biblical truth tell of being persecuted for it by other professing Christians, something I myself have also faced!

Need: *So we ask, "With religious persecution being a problem in today's world, what would God have us do?!"*

I. In line with past lessons in this series, the Revelation 2:8-11 message to the Church at Smyrna addressed the Persecuted Church, A. D. 64 - 311, from Nero to Diocletian (Ryrie Study Bible, KJV, 1978, ftn. to Rev. 2:10), and Revelation 2:8 exposes that Church's concern on facing persecution for the faith:

- A. In Revelation 2:8, Christ **emphasized** qualities about Himself that exposed the Persecuted Church's concerns:
1. First, Christ called Himself "the First and the Last," the same Greek terms used of Himself in Revelation 1:17b (U. B. S. Grk. N. T., 1966, p. 838-839) recalling Isaiah 44:6 and 48:11-12 where God held there was no god but Himself. Christ thus upheld the Persecuted Church's stand not to worship the Roman emperor.
 2. Second, Jesus said He was dead, but now lives in victory over death, the claim He made in Revelation 1:18a, which claim if taken together with "the First and the Last" statement was used back in Revelation 1:17b to call John not to fear. Christ thus called the Persecuted Church not to fear Rome's persecution.
 3. The expression "was dead" uses the **middle voice** for the Greek verb "was" (*egeneto*, Ibid., p. 839; Analyt. Grk. Lex. (Zon.), 1972, p. 112), meaning Jesus caused Himself to die for His benefit, His own glory (John 10:18), revealing His sovereign control of death and dying for the believer under persecution, Rev. 1:18b.
- B. These emphases showed the Persecuted Church **needed** to **trust Christ** in **taking a stand against worshipping the Roman emperor, not fearing even death to do so, for Jesus was sovereign over death to His own glory!**

II. In Revelation 2:9, Christ addressed the Persecuted Church's "soft" persecution that it already faced:

- A. Jesus knew of their "tribulation and poverty," and elsewhere in the N. T., only in 2 Corinthians 8:2 do the Greek terms for these words appear together (Arndt & Gingrich, A Grk.-Eng. Lex. of the N. T., 1967, p. 735).
- B. That verse in turn tells how the churches of Thessalonica gave out of their material poverty, with Acts 17:5-9 reporting how Jason, a believer there, had to post a costly bond due to slander from Jews about Christians.
- C. Christ also knew the "blasphemy" (KJV), or better here, the "slander" (*blasphemia*, Ibid., p. 142) of those who called themselves Jews but were not, but who were of the synagogue of *Satan* (Rev. 2:9b), and Romans 2:28-29 defines these Jews as **physical** Jews who were **not spiritual** Jews **since they did not trust in Jesus Christ**.
- D. Combining the facts presented in sections "II, A-C" above, we learn that *Christ* in Revelation 3:9 **cryptically** communicated that *He knew Jews were slandering Christians to Roman authorities in "soft" persecution, claiming that the Christians' refusal to worship the emperor arose from their heeding a rival king Jesus in insurrection against Rome, spurring officials to turn against Christians, resulting in their impoverishment.*

- E. [This Revelation 3:9 summary is verified by Church History: Christian persecution "as a whole began with the Jews' attacks upon the Church, but before long they sought the assistance of . . . esp. the Rom. authorities . . . As the Church advanced. . . Christianity . . . with . . . its refusal to accept the developing emperor worship inevitably had a confrontation with the imperial authorities." (*Zon. Pict. Ency. Bible*, vol. Four, p. 705-706)]
- F. Yet, Jesus added that, opposite their **material poverty**, these believers were nevertheless *plousios*, "rich," and elsewhere in the N. T., believers are called *plousios only* in James 2:5 and Revelation 3:17 **and only in the figurative sense** to describe their being *spiritually rich in faith*; *Ibid.*, Arndt & Gingrich, p. 679.
- G. Thus, **regardless of refusing to worship the emperor and of the slander of Jews to the Romans that they were in rebellion against Roman rule for looking for another King, Jesus, and regardless how this had materially cost them in persecution, these believers were spiritually rich, living a life of faith in Christ!**
- III. Christ in Revelation 2:10 then called the Persecuted Church to a special calling of "hard" persecution:**
- A. Jesus urged the Church **not to fear for its own benefit** (middle voice, *phobou*, *Ibid.*, *The Anal. Lex.*, p. 428) **anything** (*meden*, *Ibid.*, *U. B. S. Grk. N. T.*, 1966, p. 840; *Ibid.*, Arndt & Gingrich, p. 519-520), that **"behold"** [the event would be historically visible] the *Devil* would cast some of them into prison to be persecuted for "ten days," the ten persecutions from Nero to Diocletian, A. D. 64-311, *Ibid.*, Ryrie, fn. to Revelation 2:10.
- B. They were to be faithful to Christ even unto death to receive a crown of life that is mentioned elsewhere in the N. T. **only** in James 1:12 as God's reward for overcoming the temptation to sin, Rev. 2:10; *Ibid.*, p. 774-775.
- C. In **summary, believers were not to fear anything they faced in ten future eras of "hard" persecution by Rome. Living by faith in Christ Who alone was God and sovereign over life and death to His own glory, they were not to recant their faith in not worshiping the emperor even unto death to gain a crown of life.**
- D. [In visible history, between 1.75 and 4 **million** Christians are buried in the catacombs around Rome, so much so that these catacombs today cushion the city against earthquakes, *Ibid.*, *Zon. Pic. Ency. Bib.*, v. One, p. 761.]
- IV. For faithfulness to Him, Jesus offered deliverance from traumatic "hurt" under persecution, Rev. 2:11b:**
- A. Overcomers of the lure to recant their faith under persecution would be rewarded with not being "hurt" (*adikeo*, *Theol. Dict. N. T.*, vol. I, p. 161) of the "second death," or the **hurt** of *hell*, Rev. 2:11; 20:14; 21:8.
- B. Christ thus offered overcomers **shelter** from the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual **hurt** of persecution.

Lesson: *The Persecuted Church initially faced Satanic "soft" persecution of slander with financial loss and would see Satanic "hard" physical persecution and death for holding to their faith in Christ and refusing to worship Roman emperors. Christ thus called it to live by faith in Him Who alone as God and Sovereign over life and death to His glory, that they thus not recant even to the point of death that they might gain a crown of life for overcoming temptation and not be hurt by the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual traumas of persecution.*

Application: *May we (1) trust in Christ to be saved, John 3:16. (2) May we know that both "soft" and "hard" persecutions rise from Satanic activity (Rev. 2:9, 10; James 3:14-17 ESV). (3) Thus, (a) we must trust that Christ knows all about the persecutions we face, and will use them to His own glory. (b) He will give us a crown of life for staying true to Him in them and (c) equip us not to experience the hurt of persecution if we thus obey Him.*

Conclusion: (To illustrate the message . . .)

As a testimony of God's provision of immunity from the "hurt" of being persecuted for the Christian faith under "hard" physical persecution, Richard Wurmbrand, a Rumanian pastor who was imprisoned for fourteen years by the communists for his faith, in his book, *Tortured for Christ*, 1967, p. 90, reported: "Often, after a secret service, Christians are caught and sent to prison. There Christians wear chains with the gladness with which a bride wears a precious jewel received from her beloved. The waters in prison are still. You receive His kiss and His embraces and you would not change places with kings. I have found truly jubilant Christians only in the Bible, in the Underground Church and in prison. The Underground Church is oppressed, but it also has many friends -- even among the secret police; even among members of the government. Sometimes these secret believers protect the Underground Church.

Recently, Russian newspapers complained of the growing numbers of 'outward nonbelievers.' These, the Russian press explained, are countless men and women who work in the very echelons of communist power -- in government offices, in propaganda departments and everywhere -- who outwardly are communists, but inwardly are secret believers and members of the Underground Church."

(1) May we trust in Christ to be saved. (2) If God allows us to be persecuted for Christ, be it in the "soft" or the "hard" form, may we remain faithful to heeding God's Word, living by faith in His provisions in the experience that we might receive the crown of life and be shielded from persecution hurt!