

## RETURNING TO THE ORTHODOXY OF THE CHURCH

(Thursday—Evening Session)

Message Three

### The Church in Smyrna

Scripture Reading: Rev. 2:8-11; 1:18; 22:13

#### I. The church in Smyrna was a church under the suffering of persecution—**Rev. 2:8-11:**

- A. In Greek *Smyrna* means “myrrh,” a sweet spice that, in figure, signifies suffering; the church in Smyrna was a suffering church—v. 10:
  - 1. This persecuted church suffered in the sweetness and fragrance of Christ.
  - 2. This church was in the tribulation in Jesus and was in the fellowship of His sufferings—1:9; Phil. 3:10.
  - 3. The church in Smyrna suffered as Christ Himself did and thereby became a continuation of His suffering—Col. 1:24:
    - a. The afflictions of Christ are of two categories: those for accomplishing redemption, which have been completed by Christ Himself, and those for producing and building the church, which need to be filled up by the apostles and the believers.
    - b. “The afflictions of Christ...for His Body, which is the church” (v. 24) must be completed by His followers both individually and collectively.
    - c. In the church in Smyrna we see the collective continuation of the sufferings of Jesus.
    - d. Because this church was a continuation of Jesus’ suffering, it was truly the testimony of Jesus—Rev. 1:2, 9; 19:10.
- B. The church in Smyrna suffered “the slander from those who call themselves Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan”—2:9:
  - 1. The Judaizers slandered the suffering church by evilly criticizing her; they stubbornly insisted on keeping their Judaistic system, consisting of the Levitical priesthood, the sacrificial rituals, and the material temple, which were all types that had been fulfilled and replaced by Christ.
  - 2. Since the church under the new covenant in God’s economy had no part in their religious practice, the Judaizers slanderously criticized her.
  - 3. In principle, it is the same today, in that religious people slander the churches in the Lord’s recovery, which seek the Lord and follow Him in spirit and in life and do not care for the religious system.
  - 4. According to the Lord’s word in John 15:1, 4-5, and 18-24, the vine and the branches are opposed by the religious world (Judaism); today Christianity is the religious world, the religious system that opposes not only Christ, the true vine, but also the church, the branches of the vine—cf. Gal. 1:4.
- C. The persecution suffered by the church began from the religious synagogue of the Jews instigated by Satan, the adversary, and it was consummated by the Roman Empire used by the devil, the slanderer; the persecution of the suffering church was a cooperation of satanic religion and devilish politics—Rev. 2:9-10.

- D. To the suffering church the Lord Jesus said, “I know your tribulation”—v. 9:
  1. Tribulation is precious to the church because it tests the life of the church.
  2. The Lord’s purpose in allowing the church to suffer tribulation is not only to testify that His resurrection life overcomes death but also to enable the church to enjoy the riches of His life—John 11:25; Rev. 1:18; Eph. 3:8.

**II. In speaking to the church in Smyrna, the Lord said that He is “the First and the Last, who became dead and lived again”—Rev. 2:8:**

- A. The fact that Christ is the First and the Last means that He never changes:
  1. In suffering, the church must know that the Lord is the First and the Last, the ever-existing, unchanging One.
  2. Whatever the persecuting environment may be, the Lord remains the same; nothing can precede Him, nor can anything exist after Him; all things are within the limits of His control.
- B. The Lord’s declaration in verse 8 implies the creation—the First—and the completion—the Last—and it also implies Christ’s incarnation, human living, crucifixion, and resurrection:
  1. This is a declaration to strengthen the suffering church in Smyrna, which was experiencing and suffering martyrdom.
  2. The only thing that can support the saints in their martyrdom is seeing the One who created and will complete the entire universe and who was incarnated, lived on earth, was crucified, and resurrected; such a vision sustains the martyrs to stand in their sufferings—v. 10.
  3. All the local churches need to believe that the Lord Jesus is the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End; He will accomplish what He has begun in His recovery—22:13.
- C. As the One who became dead and lived again, Christ is the living One—2:8; 1:18:
  1. The Lord Jesus suffered death and lived again; He entered into death, but death could not hold Him, because He is the resurrection—Acts 2:24; John 11:25.
  2. “I became dead, and behold, I am living forever and ever”—Rev. 1:18:
    - a. Resurrection is a life that passes through death and still remains living.
    - b. Christ’s resurrection is the lengthening of His days; He will exist forever and ever in His resurrection.
  3. The resurrected Christ, the living One, is living in us and among us; therefore, all the churches should be living as He is, full of life and overcoming death—1 Tim. 3:15.
  4. The Lord’s living forever is His testimony; the more living we are, the more we are the testimony of the living Jesus—Rev. 1:2, 9; 19:10.
  5. For us to be living, we must have not only life but the life supply; as the living One, Christ cares for the churches by giving us Himself not only as life but also as the life supply—John 4:10, 14; 6:48, 51; Rev. 2:7, 17; 3:20.
- D. As the One who became dead and lived again, Christ has the keys of death and of Hades—1:18:
  1. The Lord Jesus overcame death and destroyed the devil, the keys of death

and of Hades are now in His hand, and He is victorious over the grave—Heb. 2:14; Rev. 1:18.

2. In His resurrection the Lord Jesus took away the authority of death and of Hades; death is subject to Him, and Hades is under His control—v. 18.
3. In the church life today, we are no longer subject to death and Hades, for Christ abolished death and overcame Hades in His resurrection—Heb. 2:14.
4. Christ not only defeated death—He nullified it; 2 Timothy 1:10 reveals that Christ nullified death, making it of none effect, through His devil-destroying death and death-swallowing resurrection—Heb. 2:14; 1 Cor. 15:52-54.

### III. “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life”—Rev. 2:10:

#### A. “Be faithful unto death”:

1. The Lord insists that the life of all those who serve Him belongs to Him; this is why we must be faithful even unto death.
2. Being faithful unto death is a matter both of attitude and of time:
  - a. As to our attitude, we must be faithful even unto death—12:11.
  - b. As to time, we must be faithful until death.

#### B. “I will give you the crown of life”:

1. The crown of life, as a prize to those who are faithful unto death in overcoming persecution, denotes the overcoming strength that is the power of the resurrection life (Phil. 3:10); it also denotes that these overcomers have attained to the out-resurrection from the dead (v. 11), the outstanding resurrection.
2. Not only the tree of life but the crown of life will be a reward to the suffering church—Rev. 2:7, 10:
  - a. The eating of the tree of life is inward for supply, and the crown of life is outward for glory.
  - b. The promises concerning the tree of life and the crown of life are wrapped up with the divine life (John 1:4; 10:10; 11:25; 1 John 5:11-13); this life must be our food, and then it will be our expression and our glorification as the crown of life.

### Excerpts for the Ministry:

#### THE CHURCH IN SMYRNA— THE RESURRECTION LIFE AND THE CROWN OF LIFE

The Lord was sovereign in selecting the churches to fulfill His purpose. He chose seven cities in Asia Minor: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. According to the Greek, the name of each city is very meaningful, exactly matching its spiritual significance. As we have pointed out, *Ephesus* means “desirable,” indicating that the church in Ephesus was precious to the Lord and desirable in His eyes. In Greek *Smyrna* means “myrrh.” Myrrh is a sweet spice which, in figure, signifies suffering. In typology myrrh signifies the sweet suffering of Christ. Thus, the church in Smyrna was a suffering church, prefiguring the church under the persecution of the Roman Empire from the latter part of the first century to the early part of the fourth century. This persecuted church suffered in the sweetness and fragrance of Christ. In other words, this church was in the tribulation of

Jesus and in the fellowship of His sufferings. The church in Smyrna suffered as Christ Himself did, having become a continuation of His suffering. In Colossians 1:24 Paul said that he filled up “that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for His Body, which is the church.” Paul was completing the sufferings of Christ. Although no one can continue Christ’s redemption, His sufferings must be completed by all His followers both individually and collectively. In the church in Smyrna we see the collective continuation of the sufferings of Jesus. Because this church was a continuation of Jesus’ suffering, it was truly the testimony of Jesus.

Let us now consider the speaker to the church in Smyrna. In verse 8 the Lord says, “These things says the First and the Last, who became dead and lived again.” The Lord told this suffering church that He was the First and the Last. This means that no matter how great were the sufferings through which He passed, those sufferings could not terminate or damage Him. He was the First and eventually He was also the Last. In suffering, the church must know that the Lord is the First and the Last, the ever-existing, unchanging One. Whatever the environment may be, He remains the same. Nothing can precede Him, nor can anything exist after Him. All things are within the limit of His control.

When the Lord told the church in Smyrna that He was the First and the Last, He was indicating that the church had to be victorious. The church should not be frustrated by any type of suffering. She must pass through all the sufferings and come to the end, because the Lord, who is the life and Head of the church, is the First and Last.

#### **THE ONE WHO BECAME DEAD AND LIVED AGAIN**

In this verse the Lord also said that He is the One “who became dead and lived again.” *Lived again* means resurrection. The Lord suffered death and lived again. He entered into death, but death could not hold Him (Acts 2:24) because He is the resurrection (John 11:25). The suffering church also needs to know Him as such a One that she may endure all kinds of suffering. However severe the persecution may be, the church will still be alive, for the resurrection life of Christ within her can endure death. The most suffering or persecution can do is kill us. Following the death from persecution, there is resurrection. Therefore, the Lord seemed to be telling the suffering church, “You must realize that I am the One who was persecuted to death. But that death was not the end—it was the gateway into resurrection. When I entered into death, I came into the threshold of resurrection. Do not be frightened by persecution nor terrified at the prospect of being killed. You must welcome death and be happy, for once you have passed into death, you also will be on the threshold of resurrection. Remember, I am the One who became dead and lived again.” Whatever we need, the Lord is. His qualifications exactly match our need. To the suffering church, the Lord is not only the First and the beginning but also the Last and the end. Whenever you are undergoing persecution, you must rise up and declare, “Hallelujah, I am going to the end, to the last. I am about to enter into the gateway of resurrection.” (*Life-study of Revelation*, pp. 129-131)

#### **HIS BEING THE FIRST AND THE LAST**

In Revelation 1:17 the Lord Jesus says, “I am the First and the Last.” Christ is not only the First and the Last but also the Beginning and the End. He is the First, the One at the beginning, and the Last, the One at the end. This assures us that, having started the church life, He will surely accomplish it. He will never leave His work unfinished. All the local churches must believe that the Lord Jesus is the beginning and the ending. He will accomplish what He has begun in His recovery.

**HIS BEING THE LIVING ONE,  
AND HIS BECOMING DEAD AND LIVING FOREVER AND EVER**

In Revelation 1:18 we see that the Lord is “the living One,” the One who “became dead” and who is “living forever and ever.” The Lord suffered death and lived again. He entered into death, but death could not hold Him (Acts 2:24), because He is the resurrection (John 11:25). Christ died, but in resurrection He will live forever. Resurrection is the lengthening of the Lord’s days. He will exist forever and ever in His resurrection. Jesus Christ today is the living One, the One who is in resurrection. For Christ to dispense life, He must be the living One since a dead person can never dispense life to others.

The importance of His being the living One is that He is living in us. He is living forever and is living in us. Therefore, He wants us to leave every kind of death and rise up to be the living church. The living One within us can never be dead. His church should be neither dead nor deadened; instead, His church must be living all the time. We must learn to enjoy Christ as the living One. His living forever is His testimony, for the testimony of Jesus is always related to the matter of being living. If a local church is not living, it will not have the testimony of Jesus. The more living we are, the more we are the testimony of the living Jesus.

The Christ who walks in the midst of the churches, who is the Head of the churches and to whom the churches belong, is the living One—full of life. Hence, the churches as His Body should also be living, fresh, and strong. We have a living Christ who has overcome death. Our Christ, who is the resurrected One, is living in us and among us. He is living forever and ever. What a living Christ we have in the recovery! In the recovery all the churches should be as living as Christ, full of life and overcoming death.

The Lord Jesus is the living One. For us to be living, we must have not only life but also the life supply. If we do not eat any food, we will not be so living, but if we eat nutritious meals, we will be living and even energetic. Our energy comes from our eating. The living Christ cares for the churches by giving to the believers Himself as their food and life supply. Therefore, in His seven epistles to the seven churches, the Lord as the living One presents three promises of eating: the tree of life (Rev. 2:7), the hidden manna (v. 17), and a feast full of His riches (3:20). If we would be living, we need to eat Christ as the tree of life and the hidden manna and to feast with Him.

It was to the church in Smyrna, the suffering church, that the Lord revealed Himself as the One who became dead and lived again. The suffering church needs to know Him as such a One so that she may endure all kinds of suffering. However severe the persecution may be, the church will still be alive, for the resurrection life of Christ within her can endure death. The most that suffering or persecution can do is to kill us. Following the death from persecution, there is resurrection. The Lord was persecuted to death. But that death was not the end—it was the gateway into resurrection. When He entered into death, He came to the threshold of resurrection. This indicates that the suffering church should not be frightened by persecution or terrified at the prospect of being killed; rather, she must welcome death and be happy, for once she has passed into death, she also will be on the threshold of resurrection. Whenever we are undergoing persecution, we must rise up and declare, “Hallelujah, I am about to enter into the gateway of resurrection.”

To the church, tribulation is a test of life. The extent to which the church experiences and enjoys the resurrection life of Christ can be tested only by tribulation. Moreover, tribulation also brings in the riches of the resurrection life of Christ. The Lord’s purpose in allowing the church to suffer tribulation is not only to testify that His resurrection life overcomes death but also to enable the church to enter into the riches of His life. The Lord’s resurrection life

is in the church. Christ, the One who is the resurrection, is living in us. Because we have resurrection life in us, there is no reason or excuse for us to fail. We need not be defeated by persecution. Rather, we must suffer this persecution victoriously by His resurrection life.

#### **HIS HAVING THE KEYS OF DEATH AND OF HADES**

In Revelation 1:18 the Lord also says, "I have the keys of death and of Hades." Due to the fall and sin of man, death came in and is now working on earth to gather up all the sinful people into Hades. Death resembles a dustpan used to collect the dust from the floor, and Hades resembles a trash can. Whatever the dustpan collects is put into the trash can. Thus, death is a collector, and Hades is a keeper. In the church life today we are no longer subject to death and Hades, for Christ abolished death on the cross and overcame Hades in His resurrection. Although Hades tried its best to hold Him, it was powerless to do it (Acts 2:24). With Him, death has no sting and Hades has no power. We must be the same as Christ. In the church life the keys of death and Hades are in His hand. It is impossible for us to deal with death; we simply do not have the ability to handle it. Whenever death enters, it will deaden many. But as long as we give the Lord Jesus the ground, the opportunity, and the free way to move and act among us, both death and Hades will be under His control. However, whenever the Lord Jesus does not have the ground in the church, death immediately becomes prevailing and Hades becomes powerful to hold the dead ones. We should praise the Lord that Christ has the keys of death and of Hades. Death is subject to Him, and Hades is under His control.

Christ's resurrection was also His victory over death, Satan, Hades, and the grave (2:24). Satan, death, Hades, and the grave form a group. Christ, the Son of Man, was not only vindicated by God and was proved to be a success in His achievements, but He was victorious over death, Satan, Hades, and the grave, all of which are a great concern and trouble to us. The Son of Man overcame death and destroyed Satan (Heb. 2:14). The keys of death and of Hades are now in His hand (Rev. 1:18), and He is victorious over the grave. Such a Christ is walking in the midst of all the local churches in His recovery, taking care of them as the golden lampstands. (*The Conclusion of the New Testament*, pp. 4153-4156)