

God's Purpose in Smyrna's Suffering (and ours!)

Jude 1:3-4

³Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.

⁴For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ.

As we begin our study of the Church of Smyrna, we will look at the life of Irenaeus, their messenger, as well as the suffering and tribulation this church experienced. Irenaeus was one of the last leaders of the early church who had a connection with one of Jesus' disciples. He had been taught by Polycarp, who, in turn, had been taught by John the Beloved. The Elijah ministry of Malachi 4 was called *to restore* the faith of the children to the Fathers, and by comparing the teachings of Irenaeus with those of Paul and Bro. Branham, we will see that both Irenaeus and Bro. Branham contended for the faith that had once been delivered to the saints.

Conditions of Smyrna

The city of Smyrna took its name from the word *myrrh*, meaning *bitter*. Myrrh was the spice used for embalming the dead. And during this period from 170 AD to 312 AD, spiritual death is beginning to set into the church.

SMYRNAEAN.CHURCH.AGE - CHURCH.AGE.BOOK CPT.4, p.122

The word Smyrna means, "bitter," being derived from the word, myrrh. Myrrh was used in embalming the dead. Thus we have a twofold significance found in the name of this age. **It was a bitter age filled with death.** The two vines within the framework of the church were drifting further apart with an increased bitterness toward the true vine on the part of the false. Death was not only the seed of the false vine but even in the true vine there was a creeping paralysis and impotence because they had already drifted from the unadulterated truth of the first few years after Pentecost; and no true believer is any stronger and spiritually healthy and alive than his knowledge of and adherence to the pure Word of God, as seen by multitudes of examples in the Old Testament. Organization was growing apace, confirming and augmenting the death of the membership, for Holy Ghost leadership was deposed and the Word was replaced by creeds, dogmas and man-made ritual.

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As the Ephesian Age was but the seed bed for the tragic Pergamean Age that was yet in the future, **this Smyrnaean Age was the rain, the sun, and the nourishment that ensured the vile corruption that would confirm the church in idolatry** which is spiritual fornication, from which she would never rise. Death was permeating her root to branch and they that partook of her, partook of bitterness and death.

In the second century, the church's expectation of Christ's return began to fade. With this cooling of their spiritual fervor, the moving of the Holy Spirit waned. Replacing the leadership of the Holy Spirit, the church became increasingly organized.

From Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol.1.

"[W]hen the apocalyptic vision became less vivid and the church's polity more rigid, the extraordinary operations of the Spirit characteristic of the early church diminished both in frequency and intensity. The decline in the eschatological hope and the rise of the monarchical episcopate are closely inter-related phenomena worthy of special treatment; both indicate a process of settling already at work in the second-century church, and perhaps earlier, by which many Christians were beginning to adjust themselves to the possibility that the church might have to live in the world for a considerable time to come. Part of that process of settling was the gradual decline, both in intensity and in frequency, of the charismata that had been so prominent in the earlier ages of the Christian movement" (Pelikan 98-99).

The visible movement of the Holy Spirit amongst the believers had always been a vindication of God's presence among them.

From Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol.1.

"Justin Martyr (AD 100-165) based his case against Judaism partly on the claim that 'among us until now there are prophetic charismata,' while they had died out among the Jews; and Irenaeus described the many brethren in the church of his day who had these charismata, speaking in tongues by the Spirit, bringing out the secrets of men's hearts and the mysteries of God" (Pelikan 99).

With the Holy Spirit no longer vindicating their faith, the established church had to validate its existence in other ways. The result was Nicolaitanism, which began in the first church age and became even stronger in the second (CAB, 99). Significantly, any actual movement of the Holy Spirit in some other part of the church had to be discredited!

From Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol.1.

"To validate its existence, the church looked increasingly not to the future, illumined by the Lord's return, nor to the present, illumined by the Spirit's extraordinary gifts, but to the past, illumined by the composition of the apostolic canon, the creation of the apostolic creed, and the establishment of the apostolic episcopate. To meet the test of apostolic orthodoxy, a movement or idea had to measure up to these norms.

"In this way the apostles became a sort of spiritual aristocracy, and the first century a golden age of the Spirit's activity. The difference between the Spirit's activity in the days of the apostolic church and in the history of the church now became a difference not only of degree but fundamentally of kind, and the promises of the New Testament on the coming of the Holy Spirit were referred primarily to the Pentecost event and only through that event, via the apostles, to the subsequent ages of the church" (Pelikan 107-108).

The Exposition of the 7 Church Ages, p.101

But see what was happening back there. That false vine was getting a hold and it was teaching that rulership by man was right. It taught that the church had to be governed. It taught a control over the people, but instead of doing it God's way, they simply took authority and vested all the spiritual power in their own hands and came out with a holy priesthood standing between God and the people. They went right back to the old Aaronic system. They became antichrist for they disposed of His mediator-ship and imposed their own. God hated that. The Ephesians hated that and any true believer will hate it too.

We would have to be stone blind not to see that same thing at work all through the ages and right now it is the worst of all. What it was, was organization. That separated the people. God's people are supposed to be one. By ONE Spirit are they ALL baptized into one body and EVERYONE is to be moved upon by the Holy Ghost and EVERYONE is to participate in the worship of God. But men wanted the preeminence, so they took over control, and bishops became archbishops, and with imposing titles they by-passed the Word of God and taught their own doctrines. They got the people to obey them until the time came that their way of worship did not in any way at all resemble the early days after Pentecost. These deeds were the beginning of apostolic succession. From apostolic succession it was one easy and quick step to "church membership" as the means of saving grace. The Word was reduced to a creed. Antichrist by his spirit was predominating the church.

Irenaeus, messenger to Smyrna

Against organized religion

THE.SMYRNAEAN.CHURCH.AGE_ JEFF.IN ROJC 185-227 TUESDAY_ 60-1206

8 The reason that I chose Irenaeus: because I believe that Irenaeus was more closer to the Scripture than Polycarp was. **Because Polycarp leaned kindly towards the Roman idea of setting up an organization. And--and Irenaeus was firmly against it; he absolutely denounced it. And then, as we all know, the great issue was coming at the Nicene Council; one of the great issues was whether God was three or God was one. And Irenaeus took the side that God was God now and just One.**

From Norman Geisler, "Irenaeus on Scripture and Tradition," (<https://normangeisler.com/irenaeus-tradition-scripture/>)
When Irenaeus wrote against the Gnostic heresies, scripture was paramount. He wasn't quoting other bishops or church

leaders, but the scriptures themselves. He does appeal to the “original apostles” (note the plural) as authorities; he does not single out Peter specifically or the Church at Rome as being preeminent. Scripture is Irenaeus’s final authority, not any man, regardless of his position in a church.

Vindicated by the Holy Spirit

The Exposition of the 7 Church Ages, p.121

“His churches in France were known to have the gifts of the Spirit among them, for the saints spoke in tongues, prophesied, raised the dead, and healed the sick by the prayer of faith. He saw the danger of any kind of organized brotherhood among the elders, pastors, etc. He stood solidly for a unified, Spirit-filled, gift-manifesting local church. And God honored him for the power of God manifested among the saints.

Biblical teaching of the Godhead (not Greek philosophical)

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9 I might read from The Ante-Nicene Fathers, volume one, page 412, just a little quotation; if you want to put that down, volume one of The Ni--ice--Nicene Fathers." And on page twelve, and it's the... If you want the volume, it's the last part of volume three:

"All the other expressions likewise being--bring out the title of one and the same Being"; (See, he's trying to say what they called Him Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and he said, "That's titles, not names, titles of the One Being." That's exactly what we teach yet today.) "as, for the example" (and then in parenthesis) (in English), "The Lord of power, The Lord Father of all, God Almighty, Most High, Creator, The Maker, and such like. These are not the names and titles of succession of different beings, but of one and the same (Amen.) by the name of which the one God, Father, is... He--He Who all these things... grant to all the... of existence, the boon of all existence."

10 **Irenaeus said that all these titles are summed up into one Name, under one God, and they are only titles of what He was.** He was the Rose of Sharon. That's what He was. That's a title. He was the Morning Star. He was Alpha; He was Omega. That's titles of what He was. He was Father. He was Son. He was Holy Ghost. **But there's one God, one God, and His Name is One. And that's one reason that I thought Irenaeus was correct in his--in his diagnosis here or interpretation of the Scripture.**

Irenaeus’s word picture of God working through history with his two hands (the Son and the Holy Spirit) emphasized the unity of God, rather than breaking God up into three separate persons.

From Justo Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought, volume 1:*

Irenaeus believed in Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but did not teach a doctrine of separate persons. He used the metaphor that “God created and rules this world by means of two ‘hands’: the Son and the Holy Spirit.” When Irenaeus “speaks of the Son as Word of God ... he emphasizes the unity between God and His Word....” Irenaeus wishes to emphasize that God’s very hands are involved in the work of creation and in the guidance of history” (164-165).

Irenaeus’ teaching of the Godhead focuses on how God reveals Himself to man over time (165, fn18)

Suffering & the Christian Life

To this suffering church, Jesus Christ highlights specific attributes of Himself: *the First and the Last, who was dead and is alive*. The believers of Smyrna can be assured that Christ understands their sufferings, and because He is both the First and Last, they can rest assured that He is greater than their sufferings.

Revelation 2:8-11

⁸And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive;

⁹I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.

¹⁰Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.

¹¹He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.

How can God say He loves us, when He permits so much suffering in our lives?

One of the classic criticisms of God concerns suffering. The critique goes something like this:

A loving person will not permit others to suffer;
 God does permit suffering;
 therefore, God is not a loving person.

In this critique, there are basic assumptions that a loving person would never purposefully inflict pain on another and, likewise, that good feelings are one of the surest indicators of someone's love. However, these are false assumptions, which disproves the argument.

Our ability to comprehend the purposes of any pain or trial that God may allow into our lives is very limited because His ways and His thoughts are much higher than ours (Is. 55:8-9). For example, a young child may be petrified of going to the dentist or to the doctor. The child may scream bloody murder in the office. Both the parent and the dentist are willingly inflicting pain on the child, an experience the child is incapable of understanding. The child associates no good feelings with the visit to the dentist's office. Yet over time, the child may very well come to understand that that trial *was* for his good.

Suffering is always with a purpose.

Exposition of the 7 Church Ages, p.125-126

Now the Lord God Almighty says, "I KNOW." There He is walking in the midst of His people. There He is, the Chief Shepherd of the flock. But does He hold back the persecution? Does He stem the tribulation? No, He does not. He simply says, "I KNOW your tribulation--I am not at all unmindful of your suffering." **What a stumbling block this is to so many people. Like Israel they wonder if God really loves them. How can God be just and loving if He stands by and watches His people suffer?**

That is what they asked in Malachi 1:1-3,

"The burden of the Word of the Lord to Israel by Malachi.

I have loved you, saith the Lord. Yet we say, Wherein hast Thou loved us? Was not Esau Jacob's brother? saith the Lord: yet I loved Jacob,

And I hated Esau, and laid his mountains and his heritage waste for the dragons of the wilderness."

You see, they could not figure out God's love. They thought that love meant no suffering. They thought that love meant a baby with parental care. But God said that His love was "elective" love. The proof of His love is ELECTION--that no matter what happened, His love was proven truly by the fact they were chosen unto salvation (because God hath chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth). He may commit you to death as He did Paul. He may commit you to suffering as He did Job. That is His prerogative. He is sovereign. But it is all with a purpose. If He did not have a purpose, then He would be the author of frustration and not of peace. His purpose is that after we have suffered awhile we would be made perfect, be established, strengthened and settled. As Job said, "He puts strength in us." (Job 23:6b) You see He, Himself, suffered. He learned obedience by the things that He suffered. He was actually made perfect by the things that He suffered.

Hebrews 5:8

Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered;

I Peter 1:5-7

⁵Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

⁶Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations:

⁷That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ:

I Peter 4:12-13

¹²Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you:

¹³But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy.

James 1:2

²My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations;

³Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience.

⁴But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.

Romans 8:17-18

¹⁷And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.

¹⁸For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

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Why does He stand by? Unless we suffer with Him we cannot reign with Him. You have to suffer to reign. The reason for this is that character simply is never made without suffering. **Character is a VICTORY, not a gift. A man without character can't reign because power apart from character is Satanic. But power with character is fit to rule.** And since He wants us to share even His throne on the same basis that He overcame and is set down in His Father's throne, then we have to overcome to sit with Him. And the little temporary suffering we go through now is not worthy to be compared to the tremendous glory that will be revealed in us when He comes. Oh, what treasures are laid up for those who are willing to enter into His kingdom through much tribulation.

"Think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you." That is what Peter said. **Is it strange that God wants us to develop a Christ-like character that comes through suffering? No sir.** And we all have trials. We are all tried and chastened as sons. Not one but goes through that. The church that is not suffering, and is not being tried, hasn't got it--it isn't of God.

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Now this special condition in Smyrna must be applied to every age. There is no age free from it. There is no true believer free from it. This is of God. This is the will of God. It is needful. **We need the Lord to teach us the truth that we are to suffer and be Christ-like in doing it. "Love suffereth long and is kind."**

The cloudy skies and storms of life are no signs of God's disapproval. Neither are bright skies and still waters signs of His love and approval. His approval of any of us is only IN THE BELOVED. His love is elective which He had for us before the foundation of the world. **Does He love us? Ah yes. But how shall we know? We shall know because He SAID SO,** and manifested that He did love us for He brought us to Himself and gave us of His Spirit, placing us as sons. **And how shall I prove my love to Him? By believing what He said, and by conducting myself with joy amidst the trials that He in His wisdom allows to come to pass.**

The pain we experience in trials is increased when we believe the devil's lies about our sufferings. And we experience comfort in trials when we believe Truth.

We may think that events in our lives determine the consequences we suffer. But there is one thing that mediates between the event and the consequence, and that is the belief we embrace regarding what happens to us. This is explained in psychologist Albert Ellis's A-B-C Theory of emotional pain. **Adversity** never leads directly to **Consequences**, though we think they do. Coming between the A and the C are **Beliefs**. Good, true beliefs make you strong. Bad, false beliefs are poison that slowly kill you. When we accept these false beliefs to our questions about our trials and suffering, our suffering multiplies exponentially on an emotional level. Doctors acknowledge that emotional pain can be the worst kind of personal suffering. Furthermore, much physical pain can actually be rooted in internal, emotional factors: between 75-90% of all illnesses can be traced back to the body's response to *stress*. The majority of emotional pain arises from mistaken or irrational beliefs that we hold regarding to what happens to us. (See Gary Habermas, "Evil, the Resurrection and the Example of Jesus," in *God and Evil: The Case for God in a World Filled with Pain*)

Example: William Branham's greatest temptation, at the bedside of his dying daughter, Sharon Rose.

AND.KNOWETH.IT.NOT_ JEFF.IN V-2 N-10 SUNDAY_ 65-0815 (this first paragraph is a summary of para. 195-207)

Then Satan moved up by the side of me there, and said, "Did you say He was a good God? Did you say He was a Healer? Why did your father die in your arms, and your brother die in your other brother's arms, and you standing in the pulpit preaching a few weeks ago? Why didn't He answer you? You said He loved you and saved you. And you just prayed, and God pulled a sheet down, said "Shut up." He won't hear you at all. Turned His back on you. He's a good God, huh? He loves you?"

AND.KNOWETH.IT.NOT_ JEFF.IN V-2 N-10 SUNDAY_ 65-0815

207 Everything he was telling me was the truth. Everything that he would say, just fall right in line, see, here. I was just then about ready to say, "Then I, if that's the way He has to act, then I won't serve Him."

208 Just as I said that, there was Something came from somewhere else, way down on the inside. Said, "Who are you, to begin with? The Lord gave, and the Lord taken away." See, that's that inside man, don't reason at all.

209 I looked back, and I thought, "How did I get on earth? I come from a bunch of drunkards. How did I get here? Who give me life? Who give me that wife? Who give me that baby? Where did my wife come from? Where did my life come from?" I said, "Though He slay me, yet I'll trust Him."

I said, "Get away from me, Satan!"

What would have happened had Bro. Branham accepted the devil's lie about his suffering? What would have been the ramifications? Did God have a purpose His servant wasn't even capable of understanding?

Satan's aim is to get us to accept his thoughts about our trials and suffering. He attempts to convince us to draw conclusions about people, circumstances, God, and even ourselves that, though very believable, are nonetheless false. As we give his lies time in our thoughts, the lies gradually take root and grow into complexes. Slowly, we construct a view of the world around us on the basis of these false views. We separate ourselves from one person at a time, and only allow in visitors who will accept our skewed views of people and situations. Gradually, we build a prison for ourselves that we prefer to the Truth about our circumstances. **However, only the Truth will set us free.**

This church at Smyrna teaches us a powerful lesson on suffering. He knows. He understands. And He can say "Fear not," because He is with us. This is why Jesus introduces Himself to this suffering church in such a personal way. They suffer immensely, but they as they trust Him, they experience extraordinary comfort and receive an extraordinary reward.

SMYRNAEAN.CHURCH.AGE - CHURCH.AGE.BOOK CPT.4, p.144

"Be thou faithful unto death." He does not say be faithful until death, but unto death. You may have to seal your testimony with your blood. Thousands, yea millions, have died during all the ages. They died in the faith. Like Antipas, the faithful martyr, they held not their lives dear unto death. Often we think that it would be almost impossible to be a martyr. But dare to recall that the faith we daily use to triumph in Christ Jesus is the same faith that upholds the Polycarps and all martyrs. The supreme faith will give supreme grace for the supreme hour. Blessed be God forever!

"And I will give thee a crown of life." Since not even a cup of cold water given in the Name of the Lord fails to receive a reward, how great shall be the reward to him who gives his life as a martyr for the Name of the Lord Jesus. Perhaps we can get a small idea if we compare this crown with the crown won in a race. In I Corinthians 9:24, Paul says,

"Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run that ye may obtain."

A crown given to the winner of the Olympic race was a garland of olive branches. But the crown spoken of here in the Revelation, given to a martyr, is the crown of royalty. Jesus calls it the crown of life. The one crown is for those who have striven; the other is for those who have given. Both crowns are incorruptible. They will not perish. The winners of the worldly race of life will soon lose the joy of the plaudits of the world. Their glory will fail. But those who give their lives for God, either by daily striving or shedding their blood as the crowning sacrifice of their lives will be given the crown of life. All too little time is spent on laboring for the eternal rewards of God. The recompense of God is too lightly esteemed. If we believe in the reality of the resurrection of the body, and an eternal kingdom of substance, then we ought to lay up in heaven those good treasures that are available to the faithful saints.