



Looking Inwards (15 mins) Caring For Each Other

*Reflecting on your life at the moment, is there anything you would like to share with other members of your home group which you feel is appropriate (this is an **opportunity to share**, not something you have to do, however: 'It's the sharing that enables the caring!') for:*

Thanksgiving?

Prayer?

Encouragement?

Support in any way?



Looking Outwards (15 mins) Concern For Others

*Is there anything concerning someone in your: family; circle of friends; neighbours; or church, which you would like to share (please be careful not to pass on anything that is **confidential** or which you think the person/people concerned would not wish to be shared) for:*

Thanksgiving?

Prayer?

Encouragement?

Support in any way?

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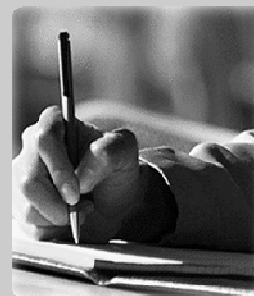


You've Got Mail: The Seven Churches In Asia HG81: **Smyrna: Persecuted But Rich**

Revelation 2:8-11

Home Group Study Notes

22nd September 2013 - Revd Paul A. Carr



PLEASE COMPLETE AS MUCH AS YOU CAN
ON THIS WORKSHEET IN PREPARATION
BEFORE THE MEETING!

*Don't forget to take your Bible to Home Group
with you, along with any previous notes and
other resources which might be helpful.*



Welcome (10 mins) Ice Breaker

What was the best piece of advice you have ever received which, when put into practise, actually worked?



Looking Upwards (10 mins) Worship

In your time of worship, you may want to sing Songs of Praise; listen to a Worship CD, as well as using Meditations; Bible Readings; Prayers ...



Looking Upwards (40 mins)

Bible Study

Read through the text for this study, and any references given below, alongside those in the sermon notes, then answer the following questions - you may find it helpful to read through the sermon notes as you do so. Discuss some, or all, of your answers with your Home Group.

1: What issue in this study has encouraged you the most? What issue has challenged you the most?

2: Can you suggest examples from your experience of how the suffering of Christians has been transformed by the sense of God's involvement in it?

3: 'We Don't Do God' said Alistair Campbell. Think of some of the people in Emmanuel who face particular pressures because they live and work in an environment which is hostile to Christian values. How can we strengthen and support them?

The rebels have been attacking Christian homes and churches, destroying Christian symbols. Many Christian communities in other parts of Syria are being deliberately targeted by Islamists. The future of the Church in Syria, which dates back to New Testament times, is now hanging in the balance as Christians run out of safe havens. One little known fact is that on 22nd April this year, an unknown armed faction kidnapped the Syriac Orthodox Bishop Yohanna Ibrahim and Boulos Yazigi, a Greek Orthodox Bishop. No news of their whereabouts has been made known since then.

Nigeria: You will know, too, that there is an increasing backlash against Christians in Nigeria with churches being burnt to the ground and Christians killed. Just this week, Muslim gunmen stopped a minibus and ordered all the passengers out. They found out who among them were Christians and forced the five men to lie down in a ditch and shot them in the back of their heads.

We Don't Do God: And, whilst Christianity might not be under persecution in this country it is being slowly squeezed out of official life. "We Don't Do God" is a famous quote by Alistair Campbell, press secretary when Tony Blair was Prime minister, referring to the fact that God and politics don't mix. As former Archbishop, Lord Carey points out in a book of the same name; God is increasingly marginalised in our society. Prohibitions on praying for others while on duty; the wearing of crosses; the decision by Parliament to support same sex marriage, and so on. Of course, we acknowledge this marginalization is far from the persecution experienced by Christians in some other parts of the world, however, each one of us should be concerned at the worrying shift towards an increasingly secular society.

Someone once said: *Many Christians today are more likely to deny their faith through fear of being laughed at than through fear of the firing squad.* Wang Mingdao, a Chinese Christian leader imprisoned for 23 years after the Communists came to power, was sustained by the convictions which he had earlier taught to others: *To maintain ones faith while enduring insults and suffering persecution for a prolonged period is more difficult than standing for the truth by laying down one's life. In order to achieve the latter it is necessary only to be strong and courageous for one day. But to endure ridicule, hostility and persecution constantly - to reproduce the strength and courage of one day for months or years or even tens of years - that requires even greater faith and courage and an even higher level of obedience.* We should never underestimate the pressure on Christians to merge into the background and to adopt the lifestyle of the surrounding culture in order to avoid ridicule/hostility. We all need God's strength to face the risks of living distinctively different lives.

Promise: The risen Christ urges the Christians of Smyrna not to collapse in the face of pressure and persecution, but to hold firm. Alluding to the 'crown of Smyrna' as well as to the crown won by an athlete, Jesus says: *I will give you the crown of life.* This isn't a temporary, fading Laurel Wreath, but a permanent crown given by the King of Heaven: an ultimate reward for those who have 'run the race'. *He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death (vs10-11).* The persecutors may kill people's bodies but they have no power to impose the death of separation from God. The Lord who stands by each of us in our daily struggle to represent him faithfully in the world. *'Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.'* Matthew 5:11-12

Prayer: Heavenly Father, grant us the courage and determination to be faithful in the persecution, slander, and opposition that we face each day. Help us to be as steadfast and determined as some of the martyrs of the church that we've thought about during this study and enable us to always have your praises in our thoughts and on our lips. In the precious name of Jesus we pray. **Amen.**

His final words were a prayer: *O Lord God Almighty, Father of thy blessed and beloved Son Jesus Christ, through whom we have received our knowledge of thee, God of Angels and Powers and of all creation and of the whole race of the righteous who live before thy face, I bless thee in that thou hast deemed me worthy of this day and hour; that I might take a portion among the martyrs in the cup of Christ, to the resurrection of eternal life both of soul and body in the incorruption of the Holy Spirit.*

Reformation Martyrs: Many of you will know about Bishop's Ridley and Latimer being burnt at the stake in Oxford on 16th October 1555. But did you know that four people from Billericay were burnt at the stake and two were hung during that same year? One of them, Thomas Watts, a linen draper, refusing to renounce his 'non-conformist views' and attend worship in the Catholic Church, was burnt at the stake on 5th April 1555 by the command of the Bishop of London. He is recorded as saying: *"I am weary to live in such idolatry as you would have me live in."*

If you know anything about the history of the CofE you'll know that these men, and many others like them, were martyred because they spoke against the teaching of Rome during the Reformation. A rather startling fact is that the greatest number of Christians put to death for their faith was not in the 1st or 16th century but in the 20th! We know much of the persecution of Christians behind, what we knew to be the Iron and Bamboo Curtains, through the stories of people like Brother Yun (The Heavenly Man), Brother Andrew (God's Smuggler), Richard Wurmbrand and Corrie Ten Boom.

Uganda: I wonder if you've heard about Janani Luwum? Archbishop Janani Luwum was one of the victims of Idi Amin's tyranny in Uganda. Amin was a Muslim and he destroyed many churches and vented his anger against many church leaders in order to purge Uganda of the Christian faith – this is why former High Court Judge, and now Archbishop of York, John Sentamu left Uganda. Archbishop Luwum's quiet but firm opposition to Amin's policies became more than the dictator could stomach. When he was summoned for a meeting with the President his wife tried to dissuade him from going. 'I will go', he replied. 'Even if he kills me, my blood will save the nation.' (And they were prophetic words with 48% of Ugandan's now active Christians). When, on 16th February 1977, trumped-up charges were read out at a staged trial, he whispered to a fellow-bishop, 'They are going to kill me. I am not afraid.' Later the same day he was shot.

Egypt: the Church in Egypt is one of the oldest in the world. Egypt's former capital Alexandria was one of the great Christian centres until 640 AD, when the country was invaded by Muslim Arabs. Today there are an estimated eight million Christians; around 90% of the population are Muslims. Egyptian Christians have suffered centuries of discrimination, and most of the wealthier Christians have left the country in the last few decades. Those who remain largely live in extreme poverty. They struggle with crippling restrictions and injustice, as well as violence related to the construction and repair of church buildings. The Egyptian revolution of 2011 and the toppling of former President Mubarak seemed to offer some prospect of greater freedoms, but subsequent events have largely dashed these hopes. In just one example, two members of a Christian family were shot dead in October 2012 as a notorious Muslim gang leader tried to kidnap their female relative. A new report indicates that the kidnapping, forced conversion to Islam and forced marriage of Christian women has also escalated.

Syria: Syrian Christians comprise around 10% of the country's population and are increasingly vulnerable as the brutal civil war rages on. A siege over the last week at the Christian village of Maaloula – one of the most historic centres of Christianity in the world – has magnified the stark threat to the minority community's very survival in the country. The Barnabas Fund tell us that Al-Qaeda-linked rebels have seized control of the village, where Aramaic, the ancient language spoken by Jesus, is still used; fighting against government forces is ongoing.

4: Read the quote from Wang Mingdao (under the heading '*We Don't Do God*') and share your experiences of how this may be true in your own life.

5: What would you hope your last words would be if you were to be martyred for your faith?

6: *I know your afflictions and your poverty - yet you are rich!* (vs9). What kinds of riches do you think these words refer to? Share with each other your thoughts about how Jesus has enriched your own experience, and then make these thoughts the basis of prayers of thanksgiving.



Is there anything you most want to put into practice as a result of this study?



You've Got Mail: The Seven Churches In Asia HG81: Smyrna: Persecuted But Rich

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Home Group Sermon Notes

22nd September 2013 - Revd Paul A. Carr

Setting the Scene: Smyrna (now the city of Izmir) is situated 35 miles to the north of Ephesus and was home to more than 100,000 people. Its importance as a city derived from its secure harbour at the eastern end of a narrow gulf on the Aegean coastline. Smyrna was built around Mount Pagus and on the summit a number of pagan temples had been built in a circle which, viewed from a distance, gave rise to its nickname 'the crown of Smyrna'. The city was also well-known for groves of trees whose bark produced an aromatic gum known as myrrh, one of the precious spices brought to Jesus by the Magi from the east and used in Jesus' embalming and burial.

If Ephesus was the market place of Asia Minor, Smyrna was described as its 'ornament.' Aelius Aristides, a second century orator who lived in Smyrna, spoke of 'the grace which extends over every part of it like a rainbow, and the brightness which reaches up towards the skies, like the glitter of the bronze of armour in Homer's epics' ('The Iliad' and 'The Odyssey'). Homer was to the Greeks what Shakespeare is to us, and Smyrna was his Stratford-upon-Avon.

Greeting: The church in Smyrna are reminded who it is who addresses her, he is, vs8: *the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.* The people of Smyrna knew, firsthand, about death and resurrection. Their city had been destroyed about 600 BC, and then re-established on a new site 300 years later. It was, said Aristides, like a phoenix - the mythical bird, which, at the end of its life, burns itself on a funeral pyre and rises renewed from its own ashes. The phoenix also appears in early Christian art as a symbol of Jesus' resurrection. Christians at Smyrna serve a Lord whose death was not the end, but the source of life for all who trust in him. He has this power over death because he is 'the First and the Last'. In the OT this is a title of God himself (Is. 44:6; 48:12). He is the source of everything that exists and nothing can frustrate his loving purpose for the world. *'Thy kingdom come, they will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.'*

Address: Jesus commends the Christians at Smyrna:

I Know Your Afflictions And Your Poverty (vs9). In a prosperous town, Smyrna was a church that faced persecution and poverty. This was probably a direct result of other people's hostility towards them. Had their property been attacked by mobs. Perhaps it was hard for them to get work because they were unwilling to compromise or because employers viewed them with suspicion.

Yet You Are Rich! (vs9). Poor and battered maybe, but they are rich in everything that really matters. For countless Christians today living under oppressive regimes, their faith keeps them at the back of the queue for jobs, deprives them of opportunities for higher education, and ensures their continuing poverty. But are they really poorer than those who have become comfortable under the mind-boggling effects of affluence? I don't think so.

I Know The Slander: The real problem for the church in Smyrna, however, wasn't poverty but the Jews! *I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan* (vs9). Why should Jesus' followers provoke slanderous attacks by Jews? Why should John be so provocative as to call them a synagogue, not of God, but of Satan? We know from the book of Acts that the Jews often stirred up opposition to the Christian message and we also know from early literature that there was a smear campaign with lies being told about them. They were accused of being cannibals because they talked about eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ. You can imagine the reaction that brought. And, because they refused to acknowledge pagan gods, they were called atheists. Consequently, they were treated with scorn in a world given over to idolatry. And, when Christians talked about loving one another, lies were spread that they met to indulge in immoral and lascivious practices. This slander is what produced much of the persecution they faced.

Challenge: It's interesting to note from our reading that Jesus has no criticism for the church in Smyrna. However, he does give them some warnings:

Persecution Will Come: It was tough being a Christian in Smyrna. They faced continuous and cruel hostility. This persecution was costly for some of them: *The devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days* (vs10). There's no promise of escape from suffering, although there is a hint as to where it comes from and is therefore part of the spiritual battle which rages between good and evil, between the power of God and the forces of the enemy seeking to frustrate him. The ten days here recall inscriptions found at Smyrna announcing athletic games and gladiatorial contests, for which the city was famous. Some of Smyrna's Christians would become the victims of gladiators' swords and were tortured in ways almost beyond belief. Their bodies were torn apart on racks. They were wrapped in animal skins and thrown out for bulls to gore. They were covered with tar and set alight to light the festivities of the pagans.

As God's people we are called not to avoid suffering, not even to understand it, but to suffer with the Lord Jesus in order to share his glory. The one who says: *Do not be afraid* (vs10), is the Lord whose own suffering opened the way to life.

Polycarp - Bishop of Smyrna: One of the recipients of John's letter was a young man named Polycarp. He is one of, what we might call, 'the early Church fathers' and was Bishop of Smyrna. He was martyred in AD156 at the age of 86. Polycarp was revered as the last link with those disciples who had known Jesus during his earthly life, having sat at the feet of John. The account of his death tells how, during an outbreak of anti-Christian activity in the province of Asia, the baying mob cried out for Polycarp's blood. The authorities sent for him and an official, probably wishing to spare the old man the indignities ahead, asked: 'What harm is there in just saying "Caesar is Lord" and offering incense, when it will save your life?'

Polycarp refused his advice, and was taken to the arena where the provincial governor himself tried to persuade him to renounce his faith. 'Have some respect for your age,' he said. 'Swear an oath by the divinity of Caesar, repent and say, "Down with the atheists!"' By 'atheists', of course, the governor meant the Christians, but Polycarp waved his hand towards the seething crowd in the arena and said, 'Down with the atheists!' The governor pressed him further: 'Take the oath and I will let you go. Revile your Christ.' Polycarp then made his memorable reply: '86 years I have served him, and he has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King and Saviour?' Further argument proved fruitless. Polycarp was threatened with being thrown to wild beasts but eventually it was decided to burn him to death. The crowd, including Jews whose hostility to Christians evidently continued, gathered firewood, and Polycarp was chained to the stake.