

Lesson 84

- We are studying the Book of Revelation. We have already looked at Chapter 1, and in the last class, we began studying Chapter 2. Chapter 1, within the general division of Revelation, deals with 'the things which you have seen,' which are the things that John had just witnessed. John saw the majestic and wonderful figure of Jesus Christ as Judge and Sovereign Lord.
- We began by studying what Revelation calls 'the things which are,' which are described in the present tense and refer to our time period. These '*things*' clearly refer to the letters to the seven Churches, indicating that the age of the Church is the present time. John lived in that age, and we still live in it. To us, the Church is the present age; it is as if mail had arrived at our house bearing these letters with their messages.
- When we receive a letter directly from God, can we remain indifferent to its contents? No, not at all. God is steadfast, and in Chapter 1, He emphatically states that He is the one sending these letters. Believe me, you and I are receiving a letter from God, and we are accountable for every piece of information we receive. These letters are the most complete, profound, and forceful exhortation, and they should 'mess with us' and transform our Christian lives.
- Therefore, we must approach this study with the utmost seriousness, not lightly. We must pray to the Holy Spirit for the seriousness necessary to receive the exhortations contained in these seven letters. We must examine our Christian lives and our relationship with God in light of these messages. It is crucial to align ourselves with the Word of God and His exhortations, especially in these final days.
- We have seen that the letter to the Church in Ephesus describes the situation the Church was actually facing at that time. It also prophecies how the Church would develop during the first century. John could not have foreseen that the letter to the Church in Ephesus would apply to the Church until the end of the first century, nor could he have foreseen this regarding the other letters. How can we affirm this division? Because it is all history to us. We are assigning dates since it has all already happened.
- We refer to the Church in Ephesus as representative of the Apostolic Church, which was led by Paul, John, Timothy, Aquila, and Priscilla. It was a steadfast Church that served the Lord Jesus, recognized its errors, and worked hard. However, Jesus saw the first signs of apostasy from sound doctrine, which unleashed evil within the Church. That seed was the cooling of the first love. Rather than being uprooted, this seed was left alone, bore fruit, spread, and remains present among us today.
- The first kind of love is loving Jesus for who He is, not for what He does or can do. It means never taking your eyes off Jesus. These days, people have been drawn to Jesus solely because of what He can do, partly due to the message preached in Churches. Many say, '*Come to Jesus, for He heals diseases and can take care of your finances; come to Jesus, for he can do this and that.*' Jesus heals, delivers, and performs miracles because of His mercy. However, we must come to Jesus for Jesus' sake. The seed of apostasy in the life of any Christian is the cooling of the first love for Jesus Christ.

- We have also seen the second seed of apostasy, the work of the Nicolaitans. Who were they? They were those who dominated the people and the clergy-laity doctrine. They claimed that the people could only draw near to God and understand the Bible through them. The term '*Nicolaitans*' means '*dominators of the people*.'
- So, this was the nature of the Church in the first century. Jesus walked among the Churches and held their leaders in His hands. However, the seeds of apostasy were already present. As we study the history of the Church, we see that certain doctrines have arisen within it that were rejected by the Church itself. This has been the case since its earliest days.
- Read and reread these letters. Ask the Holy Spirit for guidance. Do what Jesus teaches us if you are losing your first love. Don't become discouraged by thinking that you've lost your first love and that everything is hopeless. Instead, look for the solution. Jesus says, '*I am here. Come to me. You are still at the beginning. Come to me. Repent and return.*' There is always a new beginning for those who belong to Jesus.

Letter to the Church in Smyrna ⇒ Revelation 2:8~11

(The Persecuted Church)

- Smyrna comes from the root of the word '*myrrh*.' Myrrh was a fragrant substance used for embalming the dead in ancient times. Smyrna also means '*bitter*' or '*bitterness*.' It represents the suffering Church from 100 to 312 CE, when it was persecuted by the Roman Empire.

⇒ **2 Corinthians 2:14~17**; '*For we are to God the fragrance of Christ*'

- We are the sweet fragrance of Christ. Myrrh is a plant whose fragrance is extracted by crushing. When our brothers and sisters in the Church, represented by Smyrna, '*were persecuted and crushed*' by the Roman Empire, the sweet fragrance of Christ was felt. Though bitter, many seeds of true Christianity were sown during that time.

⇒ **John 12:24**

- This Church literally lived out this verse, experiencing tremendous growth during that time. The more Christians who died, the more the Church grew. Therefore, in the next phase, Satan changed his strategy. The more the Church was persecuted, the more it grew.
- **(V.8)**; see how Jesus introduced himself to this Church: '*These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life.*' Jesus reminds the suffering Church: '*I have experienced what you are experiencing, yet I am still alive.*' Don't think of yourselves as martyrs just because you're being persecuted for the Gospel. Nothing we experience in this life is different from what Jesus has already endured. He is the first in all things, including suffering.

- **(V.9); *I know your works, tribulation...***

The word '*tribulation*' literally means '*to be squeezed from both sides.*' Smyrna was probably the second largest city in Asia Minor, after Ephesus. There was a strong Jewish community in Smyrna. The Jews had received permission from the Roman emperor to practice their religion and live according to their traditions. Consequently, the Christians of Smyrna were pressured from both sides – the Romans on one side and the Jews on the other. That is why Jesus 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.'

Jesus said this because, to God, a Jew is not someone of Jewish blood, but rather someone who believes in Him and in the Messiah.

- Did you notice the harsh words Jesus used to warn us? The Bible says, '*Do not be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him*' (⇒ **Hebrews 12:5**). Paul states that '*for the time it will come when they will not endure sound doctrine*' and will only want to hear what pleases them (⇒ **2 Timothy 4:3**). Paul is speaking to the Church, so we must be alert. When we hear harsh words, we want to lose heart. Jesus is harsh when He exposes errors.
- Have you seen any rebuke for this Church? There isn't any. We don't see Jesus saying, '*I have this or that against you.*' Do you know why? Christian character is tested, forged, and built in persecution. '***I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich)***' You are materially poor, but '*spiritually*' rich.

⇒ **2 Corinthians 6:1~10**; '*As having nothing and yet possessing all things.*'

⇒ **Matthew 6:19~21**; '*For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*'

The hallmark of a true Christian is 'having nothing yet possessing everything.' We have everything, yet we do not cling to material possessions. Those who are rich in spiritual terms possess a wealth that cannot be lost. However, those who are rich in material possessions are poor because everything they own will remain on Earth and can be lost at any moment. Even intellectual wealth is fragile; amnesia can set in, causing us to forget everything. We cling to such fragile things! People who know the Word of God should not be like this. Yet it is striking how we cling to things that have no value. Here, Jesus says, '*I know your poverty (but you are rich!)*' The Church in the era of Smyrna was characterized by material poverty and spiritual power. Until recently, the opposite was true of the Church: material wealth and spiritual poverty, a lack of spiritual power, and concern only with appearances (*thank God that is changing*).

- ***'I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not but are a synagogue of Satan.'***

⇒ **Romans 2:28~29**; The true Jew.

⇒ **Romans 4:11~12**; Speaking of Abraham.

What do these two verses show us? To God, a Jew is not someone born into a Jewish family but someone who follows in the footsteps of Abraham's faith – those who have faith. This is why God clearly tells the Jews of Smyrna who were persecuting Christians that they claim to be Jews but are not; they are synagogues of Satan.

- (V.10); ***'Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested'***

God wasn't promising to deliver them from Satan's persecution. He was merely warning them. What a Church of proven character! Literally, *'do not fear'* could be translated as *'stop fearing.'*

⇒ **2 Timothy 1:7;** *'For God has not given us a spirit of fear...'*

Stop fearing the things you must endure! Consider whether you should fear what follows: *'And you will have a tribulation for ten days.'* What a heavy thing God is saying to this Church! It is madness, for the things of God are indeed madness to this world.

- ***'And you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.'***

Brother, do not be afraid. I assure you that the Devil will throw you into prison and subject you to tribulations unlike anything you have ever experienced. You will have to remain faithful even unto death, *'which means you may die'*. But do not be afraid. Is something like this even possible? As we study these letters and compare them with the gospel preached today, we conclude that we need to reconsider some things. Jesus told them that the Devil would act against them, that they might die, and that he would not deliver them. However, Jesus said something else: *'Do not be afraid!'* Brothers and sisters, live the Christian life. Be aware that God gives us the strength to endure everything we see in the Bible and everything He tells us to do. There has never been such persecution of Christians as in the first centuries. They died in the most horrific ways imaginable yet died singing and praising God. Their witness in the arenas was so powerful that people in the stands were converted. Some were thrown into the arena immediately and died there for the sake of Jesus.

- Brothers and sisters, at that time, no one pretended to be a believer. There was no room for pretense or false believers. This is why the Church in Smyrna received no rebuke. The Church grew because it was watered by the blood of martyrs and their testimony. It grew so much that Satan changed his tactics. The more he killed Christians, the more the Church grew. No group, organization, or people survive and grow as the Christians did when they were persecuted.

Despite far less persecution and cruelty, white people nearly wiped out indigenous peoples in Brazil and North America. Many tribes were wiped out, but a few survive to this day. However, the Church of Jesus grew stronger through persecution. This proves that the Church is of God and eternal.

⇒ **Acts 5:33~42,** The Gamaliel's Advice

- Polycarp, an elderly man who led the Church in Smyrna, was arrested and brought to the arena to renounce Jesus. He replied, *'I have served my Lord for 63 years, and he has never disappointed me. How can I deny him now?'* He was then burned alive.
- Simeon was a leader in Jerusalem and who was crucified.
- Ignatius was thrown to the lions in 115 CE.
- Justin, also known as Justin the Martyr, was martyred in Rome.

- Brandina, a young slave girl, was tortured from morning until night. Then, she was asked, *'Will you deny Him?'* She replied, *'No, a Christian cannot acknowledge sin.'*

These are accounts – records left behind – about the testimonies of these martyrs. Denying Jesus meant worshipping a pagan deity or even the emperor. As it is written, *'If the grain dies, it bears much fruit.'*

- An account of a governor from that time ordering a Christian to deny Jesus: *'If you do not, I will banish you from the earth.'* The Christian replied, *'You may banish me from the earth, but you cannot banish me from Jesus. He himself said that wherever I am, he will be with me, and He will never leave me nor forsake me.'* The governor continued, *'Then I will confiscate all your possessions.'* The Christian replied, *'My treasure is in heaven. You cannot take it.'* The governor, already angry, said, *'I will kill you.'* The Christian replied, *'I have already died in Christ. I am dead to the world. My life is hidden in Christ, and you cannot take it away.'* Finally, the governor, now furious, asked, *'What can we do with this fanatic?'*
- Why does God allow suffering? Following Jesus Christ often involves suffering.

⇒ **2 Timothy 3:12**

⇒ **John 15:18~21**

Everyone who desires to live according to God's Word will be persecuted.

⇒ **Acts 9:15~16**, Saul, after his conversion, becomes Paul.

What is written? *'For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake.'* Should I take a vacation? No, suffer for my name's sake. These are Jesus's own words to Ananias regarding what Paul would face in Jesus's name. Witnessing involves suffering because we are testifying about Jesus in the enemy's world. Do you think the world will applaud? No, there is resistance. Why does God allow suffering? Often, God must discipline and teach us. ⇒ **Hebrews 12:7** *'God deals with you as with sons.'*

⇒ **2 Corinthians 12:1~10**; Paul had a similar experience with a thorn in the flesh so that he would not become exalted because of the many revelations he had received.

- Are you suffering? Seek the Lord's grace. As Paul says, *'I take pleasure in my weaknesses.'* When we have weaknesses, the Lord's grace reaches us. The suffering we are talking about is that of someone who preaches the Gospel and works for the Kingdom of God. The enemy rises up against that person. Since our conversion, the enemy has fought against us differently, trying to prevent the growth of the Kingdom of God. However, *'we must resist the devil with the Word of God, and he will flee from us'.*
- We see in this letter to the Church in Smyrna that the devil himself is behind the persecution. The letter does not say that the emperor or some man will throw you into prison; rather, it says that the devil will. Christians were persecuted by men. However, Satan was (*and is*) behind it.
If you are suffering for Christ – if you are enduring suffering and tribulations because of the name you bear, the name of Jesus – stop being afraid. The Bible says: *'Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you.'*

Go ahead and bear witness to Jesus in everything you do; your fear will disappear. Those martyrs died singing, praying, and glorifying God. Historical records show that God empowered them, so do not fear. Fear comes from the devil, but *'the perfect love casts out fear because the perfect love is God'* (⇒ **1 John 4:18**). Do not be afraid. Stand firm and bear witness to Jesus with your life (⇒ **2 Corinthians 4:8~11**).

- ***'and you will have tribulation ten days.'***

We cannot assume that ten days are ten 24-hour days. The Bible often uses the word 'days' to refer to a period of time. We have studied the expression *'the day of the Lord'* and found that it refers to the period of tribulation. Jesus said: *'Abraham saw my day and rejoiced.'* God says, *'One day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.'* By recording *'a tribulation of ten days,'* God shows that this is a limited period – Satan could not prolong the tribulation indefinitely. We also observe certain historical events linked to this 200-year period involving the number ten. For instance, during that time, emperors decreed ten times that everyone must publicly worship pagan deities or the emperor, persecuting Christians in the process. Occasionally, the empire placed a statue of the emperor in the streets, requiring everyone to pass by to worship it. Those who did not submit were threatened with the loss of their citizenship rights and property, as well as arrest and torture. Some claim that Emperor Diocletian, who ruled for ten years, was the most *'fierce'* emperor toward Christians. During that period, ten emperors persecuted Christians severely: Nero, Domitian, Trajan, Hadrian, Severus, Maximinus, Decius, Valerian, Aurelian, and Diocletian.

- In any case, God made it very clear in this letter that Satan would instigate tremendous persecution, which is exactly what happened. God gave His people true victory: ***'Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.'*** As we have already learned, the crown of life is reserved for martyrs, and this letter confirms that.

⇒ **Romans 8:18**

- Have you ever been persecuted for the sake of Jesus? Have you experienced persecution at school, at work, within your family, among friends, or in any other area? Memorize and repeat this: *'I am more than a conqueror, and the crown of life is reserved for me.'*
- **(V.11): *'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.'***

But what exactly is the second death? It is eternal death – being eternally separated from God. Anyone who dies physically without accepting Jesus goes to the lake of fire.

⇒ **Revelation 20:14;** *'Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.'*

- Did you notice that there is no rebuke for this Church? We must not complain about trials and persecutions. Persecution purifies us and causes the false ones to disappear. The more the flame of purification burns within us, the more the world will see Jesus in us. ***Amen!***