

Willing To Die

PHOCAS WAS A HOLY MAN who lived around A.D. 300 in the city of Sinope which was in the southern part of modern day Turkey. He was a grower of flowers who sold them to support himself. One night some strangers came to his home and asked for food and a place to sleep. So Phocas invited them into his home. While the men were eating the evening meal, Phocas asked them why they were traveling. They answered that they were looking for Phocas. They were sent to kill him. Phocas said nothing and showed them to bed. While they were sleeping, he went outside and dug a grave. In the morning the men asked him, "Where is this man?" Phocas answered, "I am he." History tells us the men killed him and buried him in the grave that he had dug. Phocas was willing to die for his faith.

CITY OF SMYRNA. The next church in Revelation was located in the ancient city of Smyrna. Today there is only rubble in the ancient location. The agora or commercial center, is all that is left. It is not a glamour city like London, Los Angeles, or Singapore. The modern city is now called Izmir.

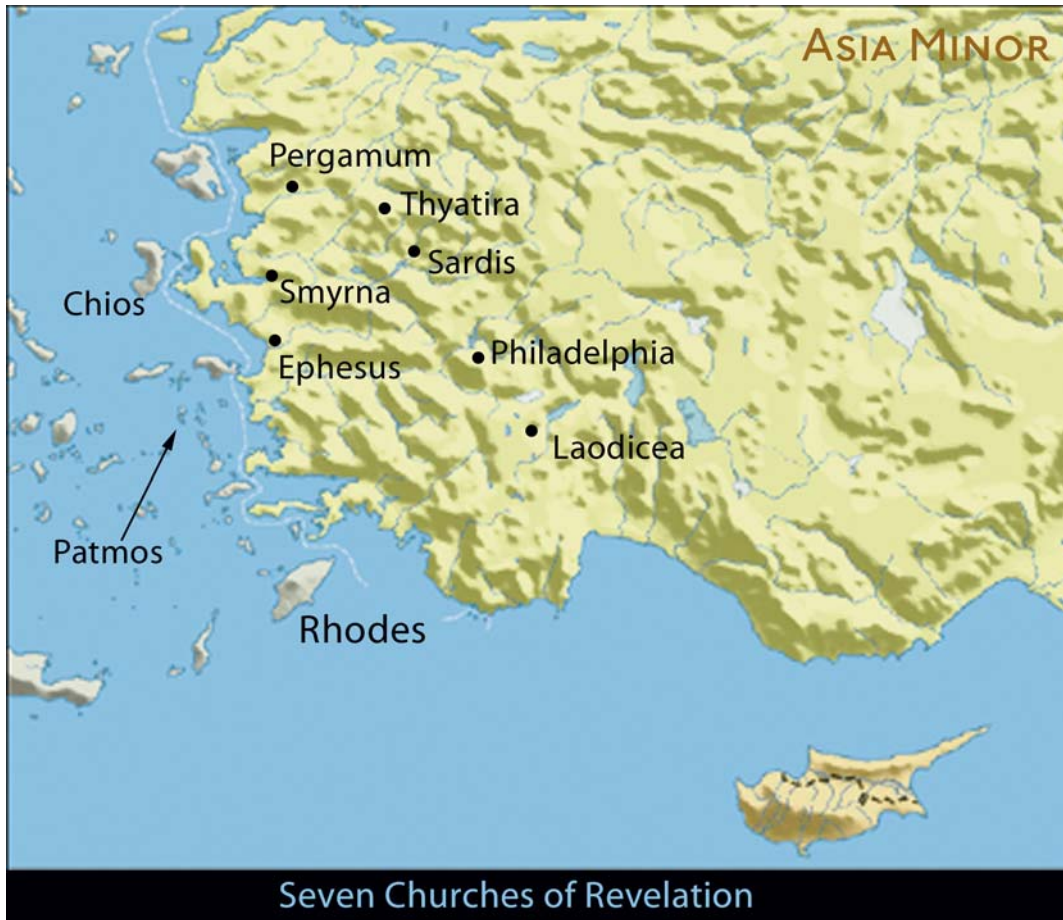
The city was located in a gulf of the Aegean Sea. It was known as the "faithful city" because of its loyalty to Rome. There are at least two key temples in the city, one to Tiberius

and another to the goddess Athena. The city was a center for science and medicine. Aristides said it was like a flower. It was a beautiful city. Today there is nothing left of the ancient coliseum to which its citizens went for entertainment. There the gladiators fought for honor and prizes. Today there is no memory of their victories. They have been forgotten.

The city was not kind to the Christians, especially the Jews. It was there that many Christians died because they believed Jesus Christ was God. One of the best known



Agora of Ancient Smyrna



martyrs among the early Christians was Polycarp. He was a pastor of this church and died in A.D. 155-156 at the age of eighty-six.

I KNOW. The Lord Jesus has only kind and tender words for the Christians in this church. He has nothing negative to say to these suffering Christians.

And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this: "I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan." (NASB) Rev. 2:8-9

Jesus says, "I know." This verb is a perfect active tense in the Greek. This means that their suffering is not about to start; they have already been suffering. What was the nature of their suffering? The Greek word for tribulation is THLIPSIS. It means that they have been "afflicted, pressured, and

mentally distressed. These Christians have been suffering for Jesus. They have been giving their lives for Him. These Christians did not stop telling others about Jesus when the suffering started. They did not stop when someone was offended because they prayed in public or shared the truth about Jesus. These Christians were bold. These Christians were suffering emotionally and physically. If you are a Christian, are you bold? Do you tell others about Jesus or are you afraid to suffer? Do you fear losing your job or possibly a friendship?

WILLING TO SUFFER. Jesus goes on to say that they were in poverty. This is an important Greek word to understand. There are two key Greek words for poverty. The first one has the idea of "having nothing extra" and the second word means to "have nothing at all." Jesus uses the last word. They had nothing at all. But how can this be? The city was wealthy and so were its citizens.

Then why are these Christians poor? They were poor because they were being persecuted. In the book of Hebrews





Temple Ruins of Ancient Smyrna

we discover that Christians lost their homes and possessions.

But remember the former days . . . you endured a great conflict of sufferings, partly, by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated. For you showed sympathy to the prisoners, and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and an abiding one. (NASB) Heb. 10:32-34

Just like these Hebrew Christians, the Christians in Smyrna were willing to lose everything for Jesus. Are you willing to lose everything for God? They were! Jesus had only good things to say about them. Why? Because there was nothing more important in their life than Jesus. They were willing to die for Him. Jesus wants our life, and not what is left.

DO NOT FEAR. These Christians needed encouragement. They were not just suffering emotionally. They were experiencing real pain.

Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil

is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days . . . (NASB) Rev. 2:10a

Most of us would be praying that the persecution would stop. But Jesus told them there is more suffering to come. It is going to get worse and not better. What a great lesson for us! Jesus may allow us to suffer for Him, and we should not stop telling others about Him if we start experiencing pain and rejection.

DOWN SIDE OF SUFFERING. How are you doing? Are you willing to suffer for Him? There is a danger when we suffer that many of us do not think about. We have already seen that some early Christians lost their homes and earthly possessions. If we were to read the book of Hebrews, we would discover that these Christians were ministering to others. That sounds like these Christians were doing very well. But that was not true. They were drifting away from Jesus. Church had become a social event.

Hebrews 5:11-14 warned the readers that they were baby Christians because they were on a diet of spiritual milk. They were not interested in solid Bible teaching. We also find in Hebrews 10:24-25 that they had become irregular

DOWNSIDE OF SUFFERING

What was their situation?

Heb. 10:32-35

Is This A Positive Sign?

Heb. 6:10

Danger Sign #1

Heb. 5:11 - 14

Danger Sign #2

Heb. 10:24 - 25

The Unseen Issue

Heb. 12:28

What is the Solution?

Heb. 11:32 - 12:1

Heb. 12:2

in their church attendance. These men and women were not growing in the faith. The entire book of Hebrews was written asking the readers to look at themselves and to see if they were real Christians. The Holy Spirit calls them to trust Jesus - to believe in Jesus. He encourages them to fix their eyes on Jesus (Heb. 12:1-2).

They had taken their eyes off of Jesus and were looking at their problems. These men and women needed to be faithful and to be thankful that they could suffer for Jesus Christ. Suffering for Jesus will reveal what kind of Christian you really are. Suffering will either cause you to move away from Him or draw you to Himself in a new and fresh, spiritual way.

CONCLUSION. So Jesus calls them to suffer for Him. He wants the Christians in Smyrna to pass the test.

. . . Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. 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.' (NASB) Rev. 2:10b-11

Jesus wants us to be faithful even until death. He promises us a wreath. This was an award given to the winning gladiator or "the victor" of a game in the coliseum. The winner usually also received a prize, so Jesus promised the winners or the ones who "overcome" a prize. He promised them that they will enter heaven. We will discover later that the second death is for those who are in hell and will end up in the Lake of Fire.

Some years later, the early church father known as Polycarp became the pastor of this church. He was a disciple of the apostle John. In about A.D. 86 he died for Jesus. The early church father Eusebius tells us what happened to him.

And when he came near, the proconsul asked him if he was Polycarp. After he confessed that he was, the proconsul tried to persuade him to deny Christ and said, "Have respect to your old age . . . swear by the fortune of Caesar; repent" . . . Then, the proconsul urging him . . . "Swear, and I will set you at liberty, reproach Christ;"



Victor's Wreath

Polycarp declared, "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?"

And when the proconsul again pressed him, and said, "Swear by the fortune of Caesar," he answered, "Since you are vainly urging . . . me to swear by the fortune of Caesar, and pretend not to know who and what I am, hear me declare with boldness, that I am a Christian .

. . . The proconsul then said to him, "I have wild beasts at hand; to these will I cast you, except thou repent."

But he answered, "Call them then . . . it is well for me to be changed from what is evil to what is righteous."

But again the proconsul said to him, "Seeing that you despise the wild beasts, I will cause you to be consumed

by fire if you do not repent." But Polycarp said, "You threaten me with fire which burns for only an hour, and after a little is extinguished, but you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. Why do you delay? Bring forth what you will." (Eusebius. The Encyclical Epistle Of The Church At Smyrna, chapters 9-10).

Jesus wants us to be faithful. He wants us to be willing to tell others about Himself - to be willing to die for Him! Are you willing?