

As I read the letter to the church in Smyrna I thought of the spiritual

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen
Nobody knows but Jesus
Nobody knows the trouble I've seen
Glory, Hallelujah!

It is true. No one knows exactly how we feel. No one knows the burdens on our hearts. No one knows the pain we often carry (both physical and spiritual). For example: Some of you know what Marcia Patton is going through as she recovers and rehabs from hip replacement surgery. You know the determination it takes for each step. The rest of us can only imagine the determination it takes to get back on your feet again following such a procedure.

The living Christ says to the congregation at Smyrna and to us, "*I know your affliction and your poverty...*" The Psalmist phrases it a little differently, "*Where can I go from your Spirit.*" If I wanted to run away from God where would I run? Where could I go and not be found by God? The conclusion: nowhere. He writes in verse 12: "*even the dark is not dark to you.*" If I could find the place of deepest darkness you would be there and see me. Thus, if God knows where we are, if there is no place where we can go and hide from God, then, Nobody knows the trouble we've seen, nobody knows but Jesus.

As we look at the congregation in Smyrna we may ask: What affliction? What poverty? We are not exactly sure about what is happening in Smyrna. We do know that it was a city located about 35 miles north of Ephesus and it was the center of Emperor Worship for Asia. It would rival Ephesus for the honor of being the first city of Asia. We also know that it had a large Jewish population and that some of this group joined with the gentiles in the region to have the Bishop Polycarp martyred. We can assume that there was strong anti-Christian sentiment in the region. Perhaps there was pressure for people not to hire Christians and that the homes of Christians were confiscated (remember Paul and his breathing fire against the church before his conversion, taking Christians from their homes and jailing them). As a strong seat of Emperor worship, participation in certain pagan rituals may have been required to hold a position in the union—in one of Asia's richest cities we have a congregation in poverty.

We have a congregation being persecuted for their faith by those who should know better. The Jewish population knew the Scripture and the promises. They should have been the first to embrace the living Christ. But they are not willing to. They may form, as we have seen, some of the basis for the persecution the congregation in Smyrna is enduring.

In the midst of all this come the words, “You think you are poor but you are rich.” You are rich in the things that really matter: friendship, community, hope and faithfulness. You stand for those things that are right even to death. You have a vision that sees beyond the immediate into the eternal. Even the most marvelous structures of this earth will pass away and you see beyond that to the very depth of the heart of God. You hang on to those things that are eternal.

Now these words to the congregation in Smyrna may not see like much to us today as a congregation. We are not often in the midst of “afflictions” like the congregation there. We may experience some personal afflictions but as a people of God we are relatively unhindered in the practice of our faith. We could ask, “What afflictions?”

Do you remember the Exodus story? As God comes to Moses he comes with these words,

“I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering” (Ex. 3:7).

God has heard and knows their afflictions. It is because of this that he is calling Moses to go and free the Israelites in Egypt. Now it will take a while to convince Moses of the plan and it will eventually include Aaron and Miriam but God has heard the cries of Israel. God will use Moses, Aaron and Miriam as God’s hands, feet, eyes and ears in the redemption of Israel.

We, too, are God’s hands and feet, eyes and ears in this place. As I read this letter I began to ask myself the question: “What if much of today’s afflictions are our fault? Our fault because we have failed to be the people God has called to “go into all the world” with the message of the Gospel. What if we are:

Not living the faith we have professed.
Not hearing the voice of God to care for those in need.
Not bearing the banner of peace and reconciliation.
Not loving our neighbor.

And our lack of being these things has brought affliction and distress to God’s world?

Could it be said of us what the living Christ says of some of the Jewish residents in Smyrna, *“I know the slander on the part of those who say they are Jews (Christians) and are not, but are of the synagogue of Satan.”* Have I (we) failed to live up to our calling as Christians? Isaiah reminds Israel of their calling in Isaiah 49:6, *“It is too small a thing for you to be my servant, to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept.”* Now that is enough to remind Israel of their responsibility to their brothers/sisters but the verse continues, *“I will also make you a light for the Gentiles to bring my*

Salvation to the ends of the earth.” Did Israel forget this part of the mandate of its calling? Have we?

Our God knows the troubles we have seen. But these words are no magic formula for immediate relief. The words to the congregation in Smyrna are that the persecution will last a while longer. The present situation may grow worse before it begins to improve. The promise is a crown of life if they are faithful and stand firm against the troubles of the present time. They “*will not be harmed by the second death.*” God understands but...

We have all heard the question (and you may have asked it or be asking it): “If God knows then why doesn’t God do something?” Maybe the question has to reflect back on us. If we know, then why are we not doing something? Are we not the people of God in his place, this world? Moses balked at going back to Egypt. He had excuse after excuse why he could not do God’s work. He is happy and content in the desert with the flocks of Jethro. Why force the issue? Why not just do something dramatic and all will be well? God tells Moses that the rescue and redemption of those in Egypt is up to Moses and his willingness to be the hands and feet, the voice of God. God also says that to the church today? We are the ones God has chosen to bring the Good News of the Gospel to the whole world. Are we doing our job?

What is God saying to us today? Can you hear the voice of God calling us to stand where we have failed to stand in the past? We have been called to be Christian—followers of the living Christ – are we being faithful to our calling?

Yes, our afflictions are known – nobody knows the trouble we have seen – nobody knows but Jesus – BUT—are we being the people God has called? Nobody knows but Jesus!