

## SPECIAL INTERLUDE

### Revisiting Church History In Light Of The 500th Anniversary Of The Protestant Reformation

#### II. Smyrna: The Persecuted Church - Living By Faith For Victory Over Persecution

(Revelation 2:8-11)

Introduction: (To show the need . . .)

Our Pilgrim forefathers came to America for religious liberty, but in today's world, that liberty seems fragile:

(1) On June 7, 2017 in "a confirmation hearing for Russell Vought, nominee for deputy director of the Office of Management and Budget," former candidate for the Democratic Party's nomination for President, Senator Bernie Sanders, "took issue with a piece Vought wrote in January 2016." (Emma Green, "Bernie Sanders's Religious Test for Russell Vought," theatlantic.com, June 8, 2017) "Sanders repeatedly quoted one passage" he found "objectionable," the statement that "'Muslims . . . do not know God because they have rejected Jesus Christ his Son, and they stand condemned.'" Sanders judged that assertion to be "'Islamophobic,'" and concluded, "'This nominee is really not someone who is what this country is supposed to be about. I will vote no'" against Mr. Vought's confirmation, Ibid.

Not only did several Muslim groups send out press releases critiquing Vought's assertion, but the "American Civil Liberties Union" added "that it was Vought's views which threatened the principle of religious freedom," Ibid.

However, "Article VI of the U. S. Constitution states that 'no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States,'" so "(a)s the demands for tolerance . . . become greater, the bounds of acceptance can also become tighter . . . against the freedom of individual conscience." (Ibid.)

(2) Then, Brannon House's current Worldview Weekend newsletter reports some evangelicals are unwittingly helping foes of Christianity by using "pejoratives" like "'Islamophobia'" that progressives like Bernie Sanders use.

Need: So, we ask, "*In view of the possible future loss of religious liberty, what would God have us do?!*"

- I. **We know from past studies that the Revelation 2:8-11 message to the Church of Smyrna was for the Persecuted Church of A. D. 64 - 311 (Everett Ferguson, "Persecution in the Early Church: Did You Know?", christianitytoday.com, July 1, 1990; Ryrie Study Bible, KJV, 1978, ftn. to Rev. 2:10), and Revelation 2:8 exposes the need that Christians in that era had in facing persecution for their faith:**
  - A. Christ called Himself "the First and the Last" of Isaiah 44:6 and 48:11-12 where God said there was no true deity but Himself, so Jesus urged believers to worship Him and not yield to pressure to worship pagan gods.
  - B. Jesus also claimed that He had been dead but now lived in victory over death so that Persecuted Church era believers were not to fear even persecution unto death as He would give them victory over death in the end!
  - C. The expression "was dead" uses the *middle voice* for the verb "was" (*egeneto*, Ibid., p. 839; Analyt. Grk. Lex. (Zon.), 1972, p. 112), meaning Jesus caused Himself to die for His own benefit, His own glory (John 10:18), revealing His sovereignty over and use of death even of persecuted believers for His glory.
- II. **In Revelation 2:9, Christ addressed the "soft" persecution the Persecuted Church already faced:**
  - A. Christ knew of their "tribulation and poverty," and the Greek terms for these words appear elsewhere in the N. T. only at 2 Cor. 8:2 (Arndt & Ging., A Grk.-Eng. Lex. of the N. T., 1967, p. 735) of the Macedonia churches that gave out of tribulation and poverty, and Acts 17:5-9 explains how a believer there named Jason posted a costly bond due to Jewish slander that Christians held to rival king Jesus in insurrection against the emperor!
  - B. Christ added He knew the "slander" (*blasphemia*, Ibid., p. 142) of so-called "Jews" who were really of *Satan's* synagogue (Rev. 2:9b), and Romans 2:28-29 defines such Jews as *physical* Jews who *did not trust in Christ!*
  - C. Jesus thus knew of the "soft" persecution believers already faced from unsaved Jews who slandered them to the Romans, saying Christians did not heed the Roman gods since they heeded rival king Jesus in insurrection against the emperor, spurring Romans to afflict and impoverish Christians, Z. P. E. B., v. Four, p. 705-706.
- III. **Christ in Revelation 2:10 then taught the Persecuted Church how to face its future "hard" persecution:**
  - A. Jesus told these believers not to fear future "hard" persecution when **Satan** cast some of them into prison to test them "ten days," ten persecution eras from Roman rulers Nero to Galerius, A. D. 64 - 311, Ibid., Ferguson.
  - B. They were to be faithful unto death to receive Christ's crown of life for overcoming temptation, James 1:12.
  - C. The *means* for such faithfulness is implied in Christ's comment that the Persecuted Church, though materially poor, was spiritually "rich," recalling James 2:5 where materially poor believers were rich in **faith!** Thus, Christ wanted believers to live a life of trusting God for His help to handle "hard" persecution victoriously.
- IV. **For staying faithful, Jesus promised the Persecuted Church escape from persecution "hurt," Rev. 2:11:**
  - A. Overcomers of the lure to recant the faith would not be hurt of the second death, *hell*, Rev. 2:11; 20:14; 21:8.

- B. Christ thus offered overcomers **shelter** from the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual *pain* of persecution!
- V. **Just what the Persecuted Church faced in its ten persecutions provides for insight for later Christians:**
- A. The first 2 persecutions (Nero, A. D. 64; Pliny, Trajan's lawyer, A. D. 112) rose from the pagans' hatred of Christian beliefs and lives that critiqued sin like Jesus said would occur in John 15:18-22; Ibid., Ferguson.
  - B. The next 5 persecutions (Marcus Aurelius, A. D. 161-177; the Severan Dynasty, A. D. 193-235; Maximinus Thrax, A. D. 235-238; Decius, A. D. 249-251 and Valerian, A. D. 253-260) rose out of hatred for Christian beliefs and lives that led to slander that Christians caused natural disasters for not sacrificing to the gods, Ibid.
  - C. The last 3 persecutions (Diocletian, A. D. 303-313; his general Galerius in A. D. 304 and Galerius when he seized power, A. D. 305-310) rose via hatred of how Christian beliefs and lives critiqued sin, by slander of Christians and by Neo-platonist Porphyry's work, "Against the Christians" that slandered the O. T. book of Daniel as not being penned by Daniel, but by later writers as its prophecies of the inter-testament era were allegedly written after the events occurred (attalus.org, "Porphyrius: Comments on the Bk. of Dan.") and that the N. T. Gospel writers were "'inventors, not the historians, of those things they record about Jesus,'" Ibid.
  - D. Notably, *these same persecution issues still affect us today as predicted and explained in Scripture:*
    1. 2 Timothy 3:12 predicted that all godly Christians would face hatred, for their Bible beliefs and lives critique sin in the lost (John 15:18-22) or in even carnal believers (Galatians 4:29), what sinful folk hate.
    2. Some godly believers face personal slander fueled by hatred from the way their Biblical beliefs and lives critique sin in the lost or even in carnal believers, what Peter reported occurred in his day in 1 Peter 4:4.
    3. Even the secular Cambridge Ancient History, 1971, v. XII, p. 648-649 claims that ever since Porphyry, we Christians have faced attacks against our Bible's credibility. Such attacks are Satanic, for 1 John 2:14b reveals that we overcome Satan by using Scripture, so Satan tries to sabotage the Bible's credibility to us so that we fail to believe its reliability and thus fail to use it to overcome the Evil One!
    4. Also, Jesus claimed some who would kill believers would think they served God by doing so, John 16:2b.
    5. Jesus wanted us to *know* these things that we not get disillusioned by persecution and lose faith, John 16:1.

***Lesson:*** *The Persecuted Church faced Satanic "soft" persecution followed by Satanic "hard" physical persecution in ways that exemplify how believers throughout Church History were to handle persecution. Christ directed the persecuted to heed His Word and trust in Him to gain His shelter from persecution pain and the crown of life.*

***Application:*** *(1) May we trust in Christ to be saved and equipped to live for Him, John 3:16; Rom. 8:9b; Gal. 5:16-23. (2) May we then (a) rely on the Holy Spirit by faith to hold to Biblical beliefs (2 Tim. 1:13-14) and live rightly (Gal. 5:16-23), (c) expecting Satan to fuel the ungodly to react in anger to how our godliness critiques their sin (John 15:19-22). (d) May we expect such hatred to lead to slander of us (e) and our Bible and (f) possibly to our facing physical persecution (g) that we not be disillusioned by it all (John 16:1), (h) but keep trusting God.*

**Conclusion:** (To illustrate the message . . .)

(1) We support Russell Vought's statement that Senator Bernie Sanders opposed, the claim that "'Muslims . . . do not know God because they have rejected Jesus Christ his Son, and they stand condemned,'" by citing The Atlantic article we cited earlier as it quotes John 8:19: "'Jesus answered, 'You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also.'" It also added, "In John 3:18, Jesus says, 'Whoever believes in [the Son] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.'" (Ibid., Green) Vought's statement is then backed by Scripture, so it is **not** "Islamophobic," but true!

(2) We counter Porphyry's slander that the book of Daniel was written by later writers than Daniel and that the Gospel writers invented what they wrote about Jesus (a) by noting that when Matthew wrote his Gospel, he held that the Jewish leaders still claimed the disciples stole Jesus' body while the Roman guards slept at the tomb, Matthew 28:11-15. However, that claim is self-contradicting: sleeping men do not know what occurs while they sleep, and soldiers would not risk incriminating themselves of the capital crime of sleeping on guard duty unless their leaders wanted to cover up what really happened! (Josh McDowell, A Ready Defense, 1991, p. 229; Ibid., Ryrie, fn. to Matt. 28:13) No one would steal and hide the body of a dead Messiah, for a dead Messiah was no real Messiah in Jesus' era, cf. Luke 24:20-21a! (b) However, Matthew's Gospel held that the Jewish leaders still gave their lame story for his readers to check out its existence, and that Gospel still survived challenges of dishonesty in the first century when Christians faced many foes, so Matthew and the other evangelists told the truth about Jesus! (d) Matthew 24:15 of Matthew's credible Gospel claims Jesus said Daniel wrote the book of Daniel, so Jesus countered Porphyry's slander!

**May we trust in Christ for salvation. Then, as believers, may we obey Christ in facing persecution!**