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Revelation 2:8-11

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English Standard Version

“The Church of Persecuted Faith”

This is the 7th sermon in the series on The Book of Revelation entitled,
“The King’s Triumphant Return.”

Revelation 2:8-11

“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.’⁹ ‘I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.’¹⁰ Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.’¹¹ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.”

*Heavenly Father, thank You for giving us Your Word and making us Your people. As we look at the church in Smyrna, will You please help us? We know we’re **not** much like this church. We don’t know how we would handle this kind of persecution. We **lack** faith. We **love** comfort. And we find these words **hard**.*

So Lord, help us to meet Jesus in His glory as we see Him in these words. Do this for each of us, this morning, in Jesus’ good name, and for His great glory, Amen.

INTRODUCTION: *The Bishop of Smyrna*¹

¹ The Introduction is adapted from *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* quoted in *The Story of Christianity* by Dr. Justo Gonzalez, page 44; *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Revelation 1-11* by Dr. John MacArthur, pages 27-35; and *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*.

We're going to Smyrna today. Smyrna is one of the few churches in these letters that receive no words of rebuke from Jesus. Smyrna is a one of the first persecuted churches. Persecution of the church at Smyrna reached its peak half a century after this letter, with the execution of its aged bishop, Polycarp, in 155 AD.

The people of the city had enough of the Christians who wouldn't worship the Emperor. And so we read, "The whole multitude, marveling at the nobility of mind displayed by the devout and godly race of Christians, cried out, "Away with the Atheists; let Polycarp be sought out!" Then he was hauled before the courts of Smyrna [held in a large stadium] to renounce Jesus Christ. And when he came near, the proconsul asked him whether he was Polycarp. On confessing that he was, [the proconsul] sought to persuade him to deny [Christ], saying, "Swear by the fortune of Caesar ... Swear, and I will set you at liberty, reproach Christ."

Polycarp flatly refused; he never wavered, and said these words, **"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 yet again pressed him, he answered, "Since you are vainly urgent that I should swear by the fortune of Caesar, and pretend not to know who and what I am, hear me declare with boldness, **I am a Christian.**"

The proconsul then said to him, "I have wild beasts at hand; to these will I cast you, except you repent." But he answered, "Call them then, for we are not accustomed to repent of what is good in order to adopt that which is evil; and it is well for me to be changed from what is evil to what is righteous." But again the proconsul said to him, "I will cause you to be consumed by fire, seeing you despise the wild beasts, if you will not repent." But Polycarp said, "You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour, and after a little is extinguished, but are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. But why [do you tarry]? Bring forth what you will."

And when the funeral pyre was ready, Polycarp laid aside all his garments, and, placing his hands behind him, and being bound like a ram for sacrifice, prepared to be an acceptable burnt-offering unto God, looked up to heaven, and said, "O Lord God Almighty, the Father of thy beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, by whom we have received the knowledge of Thee, the God of angels and powers, and of every creature, and of the whole race of the righteous who live before thee, I give thanks that Thou has counted me worthy of this day and this hour, that I should have a part in the number of Thy martyrs, in the cup of Christ, to the resurrection of eternal life, both of soul and body, through the incorruption [imparted] by the Holy Ghost. Among whom may I be accepted this day as a fat and acceptable sacrifice, according as Thou, the ever-truthful God, has foreordained and now has fulfilled. Wherefore also I praise Thee for all things, I bless Thee; I glorify Thee, along with the everlasting and heavenly Jesus Christ, Thy beloved Son, with whom, to Thee, and the Holy Ghost, be glory both now and to all coming ages. Amen."

And then Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, was burned alive.

Polycarp was a disciple of the Apostle John. Polycarp was a young man, who probably heard the words of the Apostle in The Book of Revelation when it was read for the first time in Smyrna. He heard then, and lived his life, and died in accordance with these words, **Revelation 2:10, "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life."**

This is the promise of Jesus Christ given to the church in Smyrna. And His voice addresses us today in His letters to the seven churches, for each letter is what the Spirit says to all the churches. So let's start by looking at Smyrna, because what we can learn about this city will

shed great light on what Jesus writes.

So we start with ...

v. 8: THE CITY²

[Please Put Up The Map]

If you look at this map of Asia Minor, you can see that these churches form a semi-circle, lying along the road which a messenger would have used to deliver John's letter to each of them. And the second church that would receive this letter was Smyrna.

The 1st Century city of Smyrna was an amazing city that had overcome a difficult history. A beautiful city located on the coast about 35 miles north of Ephesus, Smyrna had a protected harbor on the western shore of Turkey, which permitted a flourishing trading business ... and so it was one of the most prosperous cities of Asia. There was a hill along the back of the city, and around the crest of the hill there were a number of pagan temples, forming a rough circle. Because it looked like a crown, Smyrna was called "the Crown of Asia." That will explain a reference we find later in this letter.

Smyrna was destroyed in 580 BC by the King of Lydia, but was rebuilt in 290 BC, as a model city. It was the first planned city in Asia and it was laid out in a logical manner. It boasted of a famous stadium, a huge library, and the largest public theater in Asia. The city's ability to emerge from this nearly 300 year period of abandonment to become one of the preeminent cities of the empire gave Smyrna the title, "The City That Died Yet Lives."

And so from the time it was rebuilt it developed and maintained a special relationship with Rome. The city was one of the major centers of emperor worship. This was the first city in the empire to erect a temple to the goddess Roma and the spirit of Rome (in 195 BC). In 25 AD the city was chosen by Rome to build a temple to the emperor Tiberius. As the seat of the imperial cult in Asia Minor, it would naturally come into conflict with the Christian community, thus the Christians of Smyrna were confronted with the annual requirement to say, "Caesar is Lord." That was the test the Romans applied to all their citizens.

To refuse to sprinkle incense on the fires before Caesar's image and declare him Lord was interpreted as a lack of Roman patriotism and disruptive of the unity of the empire. The Christian community experienced financial, emotional, and spiritual suffering because of their loyalty to Jesus as Lord. It meant that a great deal of pressure and persecution came upon this church because of their unwillingness to say "Caesar is Lord."

2 The Exposition of the text are adapted from the books:

Triumph of the Lamb by Dr. Dennis Johnson, pages 73-75

Discipleship on the Edge by Dr. Darrell Johnson, pages 63-74

The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia Minor in their Local Settings by Dr. Colin Hemer, p. 57-77

Seven Deadly Spirits: Revelation's Letters for Today's Church by Dr. T. Scott Daniel, pages 46-59

The New International Greek Testament Commentary: Revelation by Dr. Gregory Beale, pages 239ff

And the sermons:

"*The Revelation of Jesus Christ (Part 3)*" by Mark Driscoll, Mars Hill Church, Seattle, WA, 9/7/08

"*To The Church in Smyrna*" by Dr. Kim Riddlebarger, Christ Reformed Church, Anaheim, CA, 2002,

www.christreformed.org

"*Suffering for Christ*" by Dr. Robert Rayburn, Faith Presbyterian Church, Tacoma, WA, 9/14/08

"*Smyrna and Pergamum: The Pressured Church and the Compromised Church*" by Rev. Ray Stedman, 11/19/89 and "*Smyrna and Pergamum: Remain Faithful*" by Rev. Ron Ritchie, 7/7/96, both of Peninsula Bible Church, Palo Alto, CA

"*Smyrna, The Persecuted Church*" by Pastor David Legge, The Iron Hall Evangelical Church, Belfast, Northern Ireland, October 2007, www.preachtheword.com

The city of Smyrna was well known for groves of trees in the area whose bark was used to produce an aromatic gum resin known as “myrrh,” from which it drew its name. Of course, myrrh was one of the precious spices brought to Jesus by the wise men and was the basic element used for burial. Therefore, it’s not surprising that in both poetry and myth Smyrna became associated with great suffering. But also like myrrh, the city became associated with the expectation of the overcoming of death through resurrection.

Of the seven cities addressed in this book, Smyrna is the only one that continues as a thriving city today — it’s now known as Izmir, Turkey.

[You Can Turn Off the Map Now, Thanks]

And that sets the stage for this letter, which was not written to the city, but rather it was written for ...

v. 8a, 9: THE CHURCH

“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write ... I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.”

The church of Smyrna appears to have held a special place in John’s heart. For John there are two cities at work in Smyrna. On the one hand, the city itself had endured great suffering, but in giving itself over to the empire of Rome it has received great reward. On the other hand, the second city in Smyrna, **the church**, is now facing a period of persecution and possible death. The church in this city is a suffering church. The very strong word “**tribulation**” used to describe the experiences of these Christians is thlipsis in the Greek, which denotes **crushing pressure**. It’s used to give us the picture of a person tortured to death by being slowly crushed by a great boulder which was laid on top of him. The disciples in Smyrna were living out their faith under thlipsis, under **crushing pressure**.

The church in Smyrna faced threats from two directions. The first, and most obvious, came from the Roman Empire. Rome continually faced the problem of how to unify a vast empire that included so many different languages, cultures, and people groups. They found that unifying theme in Emperor Worship and reacted harshly to those who refused to participate.

A second and even more challenging threat came from the Jewish community living in the city. The Jews had received an exception to the policy of Emperor Worship and so this made Smyrna one of the major population centers for Jews in the Diaspora – the dispersion of the Jewish people after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Certainly many of the believers in Smyrna were Gentiles converting to Christianity, but many also came from Jewish backgrounds. In the eyes of both the Jews and the Romans, these believers were no longer Jewish, and thus they had no special rights in the empire. And therefore they were seen as a threat to the peaceable way of life in the city and, if things got bad enough, could threaten the privileges the Jewish citizens had.

There is also an acknowledgement in this letter of their poverty. It’s likely that this is a literal physical and material poverty. We don’t know exactly what made them poor, it may have been that this poverty was caused by the persecutions they were experiencing. Their homes perhaps had been pillaged; their possessions taken away. This was common in the early church in times of persecution. Perhaps they had to resort to menial work and eat cheap food to get by.

Yet the Lord says their fellowship within the congregation and their families was rich. Our Lord says true riches are those that come from within, where the heart is filled with the grace and love of God. They had one another in the body of Christ; they had the living God as

their Heavenly Father; they had the Holy Spirit of God within them bringing joy and peace to their hearts; they had an impossibly high purpose for living; they had the righteousness of Christ in which to stand before God at the Last Judgment; they had the promise of everlasting life in a world of measureless joy; they had the promise of God's presence with them at every moment while they lived in this world and they had the knowledge that if they had to suffer they had to suffer for the highest and purest and the most beautiful things and they were suffering in a way they would be so glad to have suffered when it was all said and done. Apparently **that** was the experience of the church at Smyrna. These Christians lived in want and uncertainty for one reason and one reason only ... because they were followers of ...

v. 8b: THE CHRIST

"The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life."

Our Lord addressed the church in Smyrna using one of His titles from chapter 1, just as He had with the church in Ephesus. The title "***the First and the Last***" was from the prophet Isaiah. **Isaiah 44:6**, "*Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and His Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: "I am the first and I am the last; besides Me there is no god."*

It describes the sovereign and mighty God of Israel. Jesus Christ the Son of God informed the church that He has the same title as His Father. All of creation, all of life, past, present, and future, is in the mind, heart, and hands of our Lord. He is the wall of security for believers. He is the only living God, the King of Israel, their Redeemer and their life.

This letter is also from Him "***who died and came to life.***" It's not the city that died and came to life, but it's a description of Jesus. **This** is an encouraging word to a people who were being threatened with death on a daily basis. Jesus is relating to their suffering out of His own experience. In the history of all humanity He was the only person who came to this earth from heaven, and He came with the express purpose of dying for the sin of a created people who rebelled against their Creator. Jesus' death covered the sin of fallen man, and all who place their faith in Him as their Savior and the Son of God will find their way back into the loving arms of God the Father. This reconciliation is possible because the Father raised His Son from the tomb, and now declares Him King of kings, Lord of lords, and the Head of His church. This title spoke of the hope of the resurrection to a church that was suffering and dying for His name's sake. Again, Jesus gave no word of rebuke to this congregation because they had drawn near to Him. And He tells them He knows all this even when He gives them ...

v. 10: A HARD COMMAND

The worst is yet to come, "*Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation.*"

This, by the way, is the first mention of the devil in the book of Revelation. The Lord acknowledges that He who is the First and the Last is going to allow this to happen. The devil will put some of them in prison. And He says that this persecution is to test you. It's to show you how much you have grown. It's to strip off the superficial supports that you've been leaning on and to show how much you've learned to rely upon the strength and grace of God.

In John's Gospel, Jesus tells His disciples, **John 15:18-20a**, "*If the world hates you, know that it has hated Me before it hated you.*¹⁹ *If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.*²⁰ *Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you.*"

And now in this letter to the church in Smyrna, Jesus tells this struggling congregation that they'll suffer great persecution, even to the point of death. The one who's responsible for this persecution is Jesus' ancient foe, the devil. And in Revelation 2 we see the historical outworking of what Jesus was warning about in John 15, the inevitability of the persecution of God's people at the hands of Satan.

However, because Jesus is the ultimate disposer of history, He's able to reveal that their coming tribulation will be brief. This serves as a further impetus for them to remain faithful, knowing that the time of testing will soon be over. Therefore, on the basis of who Christ is and their relationship to Him, they're commanded not to be frightened but to *"be faithful."*

Prison is **not** the primary affliction threatening these Christians, since typically in the Roman world imprisonment was the prelude to trial and execution. The Romans weren't big on maintaining prisons outside of Rome itself. Normally, once arrested, you were kept for ten days before being tried for treason ... then you were fined, whipped, exiled, or executed. No long term prison sentences. The end of verse 10 (*"Be faithful unto death"*) makes it clear that the trial in mind here is mainly that of capital punishment.

That they will have *"ten days of tribulation"* is an allusion to **Daniel 1:12-15**, *"Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. ¹³ Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king's food be observed by you, and deal with your servants according to what you see."* ¹⁴ *So he listened to them in this matter, and tested them for ten days. ¹⁵ At the end of ten days it was seen that they were better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king's food."*

The "testing" of Daniel and his three friends "for ten days" is repeated twice. During this period they went without eating the "king's choice food." The purpose of the "test" was to determine whether they could be as healthy as the other youths who ate the king's food. They were tempted to compromise with pagan religion by being pressured to eat from the king's table. They refused to do so because the food was dedicated to idols.

Furthermore, to eat at table with a king was a symbolic act in the Ancient Near East of giving complete loyalty to him above all else. The Hebrew youths wouldn't do this, particularly since the king considered himself divine. And just as centuries earlier Daniel and his friends were tested for ten days and proved faithful, so too would these Christians. Like the fate of the Hebrew children who refused to bow to Nebuchadnezzar's idol, the believers of Smyrna faced the persistent threat of political persecution from an empire that held them in suspicion.

But Jesus Christ is the Lord of His Church and even when persecuted unto death, He leaves them with ...

v. 10b-11: TWO PROMISES

"Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death."

The present-day church of Smyrna told the world just three years ago, in April of 2006, when five men entered a Christian publishing company and killed three believers in the southeastern province of Malatya, Turkey — 300 miles from Antioch where believers were first called Christians.

One of them was a man called Necati, and he was buried in his home town of **Izmir** ... **Smyrna**. His wife says these words — wives, could you say this? — "His death was full of meaning because he died for Christ and he lived for Christ. Necati was a gift from God, I feel

honored that he was in my life. I feel crowned with honor, I want to be worthy of that honor.”

Do you know what the pastor said at the funeral? He asked the world, “Don’t pray against persecution, pray for perseverance.” In **Revelation 12:11** we read about the martyrs, those who have died for their faith in Christ, “*And they have conquered him [the devil] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.*”

Once these faithful arrive in eternity, they will meet their glorified Lord Jesus, and He will give them the crown of life, the symbol of eternal life. This crown is not the *diadem*, the crown of the king. But rather, this crown is the *stephanos*, the crown of life, the crown given to the victor of the games.

This is the same word the Apostle Paul used in **1 Corinthians 9:24-25**, “*Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it.*”²⁵ *Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath [stephanos], but we an imperishable.*”

James 1:12 speaks of the same crown, “*Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love Him.*”

That trial for these Christians could have been torture, then maybe the rack, perhaps out to the stake to be burned, or to be fed to lions. Now, if you were in this church, Smyrna, would you overcome? Remember who the overcomers are: in one sense they are those who are born of God and overcome the world, and it's our faith that gives us that victory — those who believe that Jesus is the Son of God. This is a church where believers had to prove their faith by their devotion to Christ to the point of death! If that was you, would you take the name of Christ? The Lord said that if they did, they “*will not be hurt by the second death.*”

Do you know what the Lord is saying? You as a believer-overcomer might have to face death, and pass through death, and a gruesome death at that — but not the second death! Is that the way we live? The second death, if you don't know, is what Revelation 20 describes as the lake of fire — it's separation from God for all eternity. Those who are born once will die twice ... but those who are born twice will only die once. Now all of us have to die once, but some will die twice because they have never believed the Gospel. If that's you, my friend — make sure that you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Savior of Sinners. Because the sinless Savior died, can you say, “My sinful soul is counted free; for God, the just, is satisfied to look on Him and pardon me.”

Can you say that? Are you believing?

CONCLUSION: A Word for Us from the Persecuted Church³

Can I finish with this story from the persecuted church in China?

It's a conversation that was overheard between an American pastor and a Chinese pastor. This is how it went, and I'll just read it as it's ...

The American pastor asked the Chinese pastor, “What book in the Bible is most precious to you?”

The Chinese pastor said, “Well, probably the book of Revelation, because ...” and the American pastor interrupted him, “Because your suffering makes you long for the end of the

³ The Conclusion is adapted from the sermon “Introduction to Revelation” by Pastor David Legge, The Iron Hall Evangelical Church, Belfast, Northern Ireland, October 2007, www.preachtheword.com

world, and you're strengthened by the vision of how it will end with Christ's victory ... Yes?"

The Chinese pastor, "That too, but we don't take Revelation just to be a description of the way the world will end, we also see it as a description of **the way the world is now.**"

"I'm not understanding you," the American pastor said, "Surely Revelation is a book that tells us how the world will end?"

The Chinese pastor agreed, "Yes it is, but I am telling you that it is also a description of the way the world is now. Suffering has made this clear to us in China, clearly **prosperity has hidden this from you in America.**" "You see," he went on, "We had a Caesar here in China called Mao Tse Tung and he, like the Caesar of the early church period, demanded what was only God's — that he should be worshipped as a god. As in Revelation, he used a beast to coerce us, communism; and a false prophet to beguile us, false bishops. When we resisted this idolatry with the testimony of the Lamb, we were slaughtered and jailed. In this way we saw that Revelation is a description of spiritual warfare that always goes in any society, including yours."

The American pastor said, "But it's not going on in America today — you say we have that hidden from us, what do you mean?"

"Well," said the Chinese leader, "this conflict is obvious to us in China. You could not miss that Mao Tse Tung was setting himself up as an idol and demanding worship, so the veil was removed and we saw the world as it really is — a place where idols are demanding our worship. But this is not obvious to you in America because it is more subtle."

The pastor from America said, "Maybe it's not happening at all, we're a Christian country and we have a Christian president."

The Chinese pastor said, "I tell you, there are Caesars or idols in your society just as much as in ours, and even in your churches — and there are false prophets telling you that the idolatry is biblical, and beasts coercing you. For example, your Caesar may not be a person but an idea. In our fellowship," he said, "we have a clever young man who lived with an American family for a year while studying. The couple was generous, but he noticed something about them: they were always exhausted. Both worked incredibly hard, though they had plenty of money. They had three cars, two homes, expensive country club memberships — and, as far as he could tell, gave only a minimum to the Lord's work. They never asked him a single question about the Chinese church, and when he left they give him an envelope with \$20 in it. He told us, "I felt so sorry for them; they thought they were free but they were slaves. They were dropping from exhaustion because they had to live up to something called the American dream, but they never knew that the pursuit of that life had **stolen their heart from Christ.**"

"Hmmm," said the American pastor, "If what you say is true, then consumerism could be a more effective killer of faith than communism."

The Chinese pastor said, "You're right, and this is what we are afraid of here in China. Consumerism clutters up life so much that" — **listen to this** — "we fail to see the world as it is: full of idols trying to steal our worship from God."

From the perspective of earth, the **city** of Smyrna was rich. It wore the crown bestowed on it by the empire. From the perspective of heaven, it was poor, because it put its faith and hope in a power that cannot survive.

From the perspective of earth, the **church** of Smyrna was poor. They were punished for foolishly refusing to live by the greatness of the empire. From the perspective of heaven, they were rich, because they oriented their life towards a crown that never fades and can't be taken away.

From the perspective of heaven, are we rich or poor?
You need to decide because ... **The King is coming!**

Think about it. You need to pray.
Take a moment to do that, and then I'll close.

Heavenly Father, thank You for this revelation. Thank you that it shows us our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We pray, Lord, help us to be poor in the eyes of the world, but rich in Your eyes. Lord, enable us to hunger and thirst for Your righteousness and claim the promise that only You can truly satisfy our souls. We ask that You would do this ... in the Name of Your Son, Jesus, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. Amen.

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1 Peter 1:3-5

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to His great mercy, He has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”