

## Smyrna: The Suffering Church

LL&L

Revelation 2:8-11

09/24/2023

### Introduction

Tim. Pastor. **Revelation 2:8-11**. Pray.

We are continuing on in our series this morning through the first few chapters of Revelation. John, the last living apostle of Jesus, is in exile on the island of Patmos and he has a vision, where Jesus tells Him to send **7 letters to 7 churches in 7 cities** that make up the ancient Roman postal route.

And last week we looked at the first letter to Ephesus. That though they were a church full of good deeds and good doctrine Jesus had this against them – They had abandoned their love for Him. That what happened to them is a warning to all of us – that as our faith grows old, our hearts can grow cold.

And so we asked this question of ourselves – **Have we abandoned our love for Christ?**

This week we turn our attention to the next letter which is written to Smyrna. Smyrna, as you can see on the map, was located about 35 miles north of Ephesus in Asia Minor. It's a coastal city right there on the Aegean Sea. It's actually the only one of these 7 ancient cities still around today. Today it's the city of **Izmir**, the 3rd largest city in modern day Turkey. It's next on the ancient postal route and it's next in Revelation 2.



### Walkthrough of Passage – Smyrna + Suffering

So hopefully you're in Revelation 2 by now, we'll pick it up in verse 8...

**8 "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: 'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.'**

#### **BACKGROUND TO SMYRNA**

Just like in the opening to the letter to Ephesus, this letter to Smyrna opens with a reference back to part of the description of Jesus in chapter 1. Jesus says "the words of the first and the last, who died and came to life."

Now this phrase actually has sort of a double meaning. The **first meaning** points us to Jesus – his resurrection and victory of satan, sin, and death – we'll get to that later. But it also is a **sort of tongue in cheek reference** to Smyrna itself as a city.

You see, although Smyrna was a thriving city during the time of John's writing, around 93-94 AD, that wasn't always the case. 700 years earlier, 600 BC, Smyrna was actually destroyed by an enemy group known as the Lydians, and the city sat in desolate ruin for about 300 years, until, with the generous help of Rome, it was spectacularly rebuilt and brought

back to life. This rebirth was so dramatic, ancient historians actually referred to Smyrna as a city **that was dead and yet now lived**. Hence the double meaning of the opening of the letter.

**Why does that matter? Here's why** – Because Rome had helped them so much in coming back to life as a city, Smyrna proved to be incredibly loyal allies. So loyal in fact, that when emperor worship started and then became mandatory in Rome around 40 BC, Smyrna actually beat out all of the other cities around them and won the privilege of building the first temple to a living emperor in all of Asia.

So here we are at the time of John's writing and Smyrna has now been a prominent place in the ancient near east for the worship of the Roman Emperor for upwards of 140 years. And worship of the Roman emperor is not simply an option for the residents of Smyrna. It is required by law. All citizens of Smyrna must worship and declare "Caesar is Lord."

**And this is incredibly problematic for the Church of Jesus in the city. Because to Christians, Caesar is not Lord, Jesus is Lord...**

But to not worship Caesar comes with some pretty dire consequences.

**And that has become true for the church in Smyrna. We get a glimpse in verse 9 of what they are facing because of their refusal to worship Caesar as Lord...**

**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."**

Because of their refusal to worship Caesar as Lord and their faithfulness instead to Jesus, the church in Smyrna is facing three painful realities:

### **1. Tribulation**

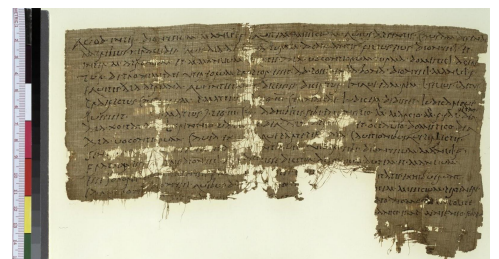
Tribulation might not be a word we use too often, but it carries the connotation of a squeezing. Think of it like a juicer and an orange. That sort of squeezing pressure. Mostly likely Jesus is referring here to some sort of physical pain or suffering or torture. Because of their faithfulness to Jesus, the church is facing physical persecution and affliction. No doubt some of them would have been arrested, tortured, killed for following Jesus.

### **2. Poverty**

They are also experiencing poverty because they've been following Jesus. And this is not just like "they can't afford a certain vacation or their house has one less bedroom than they want" ok?

- This is completely cut off and ostracized from even participating in the marketplace or economy of the city.
- This is no one will hire you for a job because you worship Jesus.
- This is you can't buy bread and milk because you worship Jesus.

You see emperor worship was not simply a religious act, but a political one. It showed you were loyal to the empire of Rome. So when you went to the temple to offer a sacrifice to the emperor you would burn incense, hail "Caesar is Lord", and in exchange receive **a certificate** like this one.



And it would say something to the effect of – “We, the representatives of the Emperor, \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_, have seen you sacrificing.” And this certificate was a mark that meant you could participate in the economy. That you were a good, loyal patron of Rome that could participate in Roman life.

And so because the church in Smyrna refused to do this, they were cut off from even basic ability to live and exist in this society.

### **3. Slander**

Here’s what verse 9 is referencing – The Jews in Smyrna had enjoyed a large degree of freedom under Roman Rule during the 1st century. They were exempt from emperor worship and some even enjoyed the rights of full citizenship. And in some places Christian were sort of folded up under that.

Remember – Christianity started in the line of Judaism. Descendants of Abraham, Moses, David. The first Christian church was made up of Jewish converts. Jesus was trained in the Jewish synagogue. The gospel first came to the Jew, and then to the Gentile.

But religious Jews in the first century didn’t like Christians, these “followers of the Way” as they were called. Because they believed that in worshiping Jesus of Nazareth as God, they were committing heresy. And that heresy, according to them – was also causing Rome to look at the Jewish people sideways.

And so the Jews in Smyrna are now slandering followers of Jesus and basically throwing them under the bus to the Roman authorities. They were “outing” the Christians that they knew, many who were probably friends and family and folks they used to attend the synagogue with, who have now started worshiping Jesus, and they’re turning them over to be prosecuted and persecuted by the Romans.

And Jesus calls them a “synagogue of Satan”, meaning that the Jewish people in Smyrna are doing the work of the Enemy to deceive and therefore derail and oppose the people of God.

### **Suffering for Jesus**

**So the church in Smyrna can’t buy groceries, can’t find jobs, they’re facing betrayal from family, friends, neighbors, and they’re living under constant threat of death.**

***And Jesus does not offer them the good news of immediate relief.***

He says this in v10:

**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...**

If we were writing this, we’d hope it would say “do not fear because your suffering is about to end.” But that’s not what Jesus tells them. He says “do not fear what you are about to suffer.” More persecution is coming. Jesus says for ten days you will have tribulation. Just for note – this is most likely not a literal 10 days, numbers in Revelation tend to be figurative. Jesus just means in comparison to eternity, the suffering you’re about to face is going to be a relatively short period of time.

And yet even still – more suffering is coming.

**This is what lies before the church at Smyrna. Suffering. Real, tangible, painful suffering.**

And this is not suffering because they live as broken, fallen people in a broken, fallen world. This is not the sort of suffering that unfortunately comes along to all humanity because of the reality of sin that causes everything in us and around us to break down and decay.

**Smyrna is suffering because they willingly choose to be faithful to Jesus and stand for Him.**

This is suffering they are facing because of their willingness to stand firm, to not bow to idols or false gods, to not capitulate to the surrounding culture, to not give up or give in. This is suffering that comes because of their faithfulness to Jesus. Where Jesus tells them – suffering is coming, be faithful unto death.

### Persecution in the Ancient Church

And this is not unique to Smyrna. Persecution, torture, poverty, slander, hatred, martyrdom (being killed for the faith) was an unfortunate reality of what it meant to follow Jesus in the first century world.

If you were to take some time to track the early history of Christianity, starting with Herod in 44 AD and on the down the line, you would see a constant thread of suffering, persecution, and martyrdom for the Church.

**To say yes to Jesus in the ancient world was to say yes to suffering.**

### Persecution in the Modern Church

**But that's not just true in the ancient world. That is true for so many of our brothers and sisters in Christ today.**

If I'm being honest, this letter is a bit hard to grasp as a modern Western reader. I mean we live in Charlotte, NC in 2023. So for you to publicly announce you're a Christian comes with a pretty low price tag, doesn't it? Yes in our secular world there might be some resistance, some pushback, but there's not full blown persecution, ok?

In our city my faith might make me a weirdo at a party, or the butt of a joke but they're not going to throw me off the roof of the building. I'm not barred from entering Harris Teeter, I'm not handed over to government authorities by my neighbors or family or friends because I'm a Christian.

But if you announce publicly you're a Christian in Pakistan, or Somalia, or Yemen, it can have dire consequences. It can cost you your business, your education, your reputation, your family, and even your life. For so many across the world, to say yes to Jesus even today is to say yes to suffering.

And this is not something I just want us to brush by real quick. I don't think I can faithfully preach this letter to Smyrna if we don't take some time to remember our brothers and sisters in Christ. To spend some time thinking about them. Praying for them.

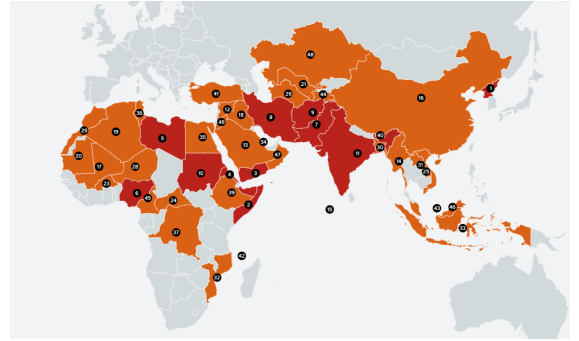
This, after all, is the encouragement of the author of Hebrews in **Hebrews 13:3 – Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.**

We are part of a local church, but also a global church. The global body of Christ that crosses cultures, time zones, and oceans. And even as we worship Jesus this morning in relative comfort and ease, parts of His body are suffering and in very real danger around the world for their faith in Jesus.

Every year, an organization called **Open Doors** releases what they call the World Watch List. It's a ranking of the 50 countries where Christians face the most extreme persecution across the world.

There are currently **360 million Christians** across the globe who face imminent threats of persecution. That is defined as hostility towards someone because of the name of Jesus.

**#1 on the list - North Korea.** They've been #1 for 20/21 years. Right now, it's estimated anywhere from 60k-70k Christians living in the country are in forced labor camps solely because they are followers of Jesus.



Some of the others on the list include places like Iran, Sudan, and Afghanistan, where Christians are being violently targeted for their faith. And this is not even to mention the hundreds of thousands of Christians who over the past decade have been forced to flee their home countries like Syria and Turkey to escape danger.

This is not the first century. This is not 95 AD in Smyrna. This is 2023. This is the world we live in now. A world in which the church on a global scale is facing its worst persecution in modern history, and it only gets worse every single year. Where every month, 500+ Xans are killed, 200+ churches or Christian properties are destroyed, and 770+ acts of violence are committed against Christ followers.

But these are not just numbers, these are people. These are our people. Our brothers and sisters in Christ with names, stories, families.

**And according to Open Doors, the #1 request from Christians in these parts of the world, more than our money or our sympathy is our prayers.** That Christians in the West would open our eyes, remember those who are being mistreated who are a part of the body of Christ with us, stand shoulder to shoulder with them as the Scriptures call us to do, and to pray.

**So I want to pause and do that right now. (PRAY)**

This week in your groups we're going to spend more time praying for the global church.

If you want to read up on this, two websites I would point you to – [opendoorsus.org](https://www.opendoorsus.org) and [persecution.com](https://www.persecution.com).

### Local Application

**Now that's the global, big application. I needed to zoom us out to talk about that...but what about us here today?**

How does this letter to Smyrna directly apply to me when I head into work on Tuesday, or as I'm getting coffee with a friend on Thursday, or running errands on Saturday, or whatever the case may be.

Here's the question I think this letter leads to and what I want to spend the rest of our time wrestling with – **Are you willing to suffer for Jesus?**

Now, it's easy on the surface to rush to the Christian answer, right? Of course I am! I'd die today for the name of Christ!

**But is that true? Just consider a few of these everyday scenarios...how do you respond?**

- Your coworker asks what you did this weekend, do you tell them the truth, that you went to church and worshiped Jesus, even though you just heard them make all of those jokes about Christians at lunch last week and you know it'll make the relationship weird, if not tense.
- Your boss asks you to back-date some numbers on the monthly report, just a little bit, so it looks better to the higher ups. Do you listen and compromise your integrity, or do you say no even though you know it might mean he doesn't want to trust you in the future?
- Your close Christian friend is actively rebelling against the Lord. Do you step in and say something, even though you know they probably will accuse you of being judgmental and it may ruin the friendship for good?
- Your community group member has a medical crisis, and they need financial help. Do you step in to try to meet that need, even though you know it might lower your standard of living just a bit, and you've been saving up for that vacation for a while and suddenly you might not be able to take it anymore?

**We need this letter to Smyrna to warn us and challenge us – be faithful unto death! – not because we may face death, but because all of us face life.**

**This letter to Smyrna, the testimony of the martyrs in church history, the faithfulness amidst persecution of our brothers and sisters in Christ across the world today – it all points us not just to how to *die well*, but how to *live well*.**

If they can be faithful to death, how much more can we be spurred on by their faithfulness and the power of the Holy Spirit to be faithful in life. To live unafraid of suffering in whatever degree that may be for the name of Jesus. Courageously taking up our cross, following Jesus, and surrendering to His will and His Lordship in our lives...even if it costs us...and even when it costs us.

Because saying yes to Jesus is saying yes to suffering, to death, in some way shape or form.

Doesn't Jesus Himself say that following Him requires a death? Look at what He says to his disciples in **Matthew 16:24-25 – 24 Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 25 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.**

You see many want to take this teaching from Jesus, this letter to Smyrna, and use it as a future warning. Look at the trajectory of America, persecution is coming! Be ready – they're going to throw us in prison, burn down our churches, ostracize us from the community, make us face death – whatever the case may be. Now, do I think this is the trajectory we're on in the US? Hard maybe. Probably not for a while. Could be wrong, who knows.

But here's what I do know and here's what we need to sit in for a minute – **It is a dangerous deception to think we would be willing to die for Christ tomorrow, when we're not willing to live for Him today.**

I'll say it even more strongly – It is the stuff of fools to think we'd have the courage to be stoned like Stephen or beaten to death like Timothy or burned by oil and exiled to an island till you die like John, when right now we're too afraid to tell our coworker about Jesus because it might get a little bit awkward and they might not invite us to lunch.

***Are you willing to suffer for Jesus?***

Are you willing to be like the church in Smyrna, even if to a lesser degree, and face what it might cost you to follow Christ?

- **Relational Cost** – awkward, misunderstood, disagreed with, put down
- **Financial Cost** – reorient your life around sacrifices for the kingdom
- **Personal Cost** – where you deny yourself of comforts to serve and sacrifice for others.

Does the consideration that you should suffer for Jesus even cross your mind? Or do you, like me, like the rest of us, as we've been trained to in our secular culture – always pursue the path of least resistance? Where we do everything we can to set up a trouble free, suffering free, pain free life – even at the expense of our discipleship and faithfulness to Christ.

**Do you face these situations in your life? Does the consideration of choosing to suffer if it means being faithful to Jesus even cross your mind?**

- Do you even consider looking for another job and derailing your upward career trajectory, because your current one pulls you away from your home and church family and robs you of the ability to follow Jesus in your everyday life?
- Could you imagine getting off the couch on a Friday night to go sit with someone in need even though you're tired, even though you're worn out from the week, even though there's a hundred things that sound more restful and fulfilling?

**EVANGELISM** – I hear this sometimes when folks are describing being afraid to share the gospel with their friend, coworker, neighbor. And I get it, people are scary. And we'll encourage them by saying something like - "I did it, it went surprisingly well. I think more people are open to it than you may realize, you can do it!"

But what if our answer instead was – "yeah it might go terribly. They might never talk to you again. Is Jesus worth that to you?"

Church – let's not push off conviction with some claim that we'd be ready to die in some far off distant may or may not happen future. When we far too often are not ready to suffer in life today, this week, in the faithfulness He asks of us.

***Are you willing to suffer for Jesus?***

### **Jesus in Revelation 2:8-11**

**That's the challenge of this passage. But again if you stop there, like we said week 1 – burden. DO BETTER. BE MORE FAITHFUL. As if this is not a continual struggle we must daily fight against for the rest of our lives.**

**And so where's the good news? Here it is – Rev 2:8-11 has a challenge, but it also has a promise.**

There's a deeper underlying thread in the letter to Smyrna. On the one hand it's a challenge – be faithful! Stand firm! Do not be afraid of the impending suffering, persecution, hardship. On the other hand, it's all about the faithful mercy and steadfast hope of Christ in the midst of it.

**Look back with me, let me just show you how Christ is at the forefront of this text.**

- **Verse 8** – Christ died and **has come to life**. Christ went through death before us. And yet, didn't stay dead. He rose again, so death no longer wins. Death is not the worst thing that can happen. Christ triumphed over death, and all his people will too.
- **Verse 9** – Christ knows your pain. "I **know** your tribulation and your poverty and the slander." He is not a distant king. He is not unable to sympathize with your weakness and trouble. He is near and he knows.
- **Verse 9** – You are **rich**. Even in poverty. Even in prison. Even in death. You are rich. Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth. "If you are children of God, then you are heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ . . . the sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that is about to be revealed to us" (Romans 8:15–18). You are rich!

- **Verse 10** – God is using these trials to **test them**. It's the same idea in James 1 where God says the testing of our faith produces steadfastness which leads to maturity. God is doing something when we are willing to suffer for His name. Suffering is not simply a bug in the Christian life. It's a feature which God intends to use to bring us more into the image of Christ.
- **Verse 10** – You will receive **a crown of life**. 10 days of suffering. That's it. Eternity is coming. When the fight is fought and the race is run and you die at the finish line, the wreath that will be put on your head will be the crown of everlasting life—no more pain, nor more slander, nor more shame, no more tears, no more depression, no more frustration and discouragement. Only life and light and joy—and God forever.
- **Verse 11** – You will not be hurt by the **second death**, that is, the lake of fire (20:14). There is something worse than death, namely, the second death. God is not mainly in the business of sparing us from the first death, or the pain that leads to it. He is utterly devoted to rescuing us from the second death, where all who did not trust in Him, who rejected His lordship, will face eternal suffering.

Smyrna – In your suffering for Christ, He is with you.

Citizens – In your suffering for Christ, He is with you.

### Application

So what does that mean for us? Jesus tells us what that means in verse 10.

#### **Do not fear...but be faithful unto death.**

We don't fear what suffering might come, we choose faithfulness to Jesus. We are faithful...all the way up unto death, which means in all of life. We listen to Him. We read His Word. We follow His commands. We live by His Kingdom values and ethics.

***And that might mean our lives get tangibly worse because we're trying to be faithful and live for Him.***

- That might mean, you have less friends in your neighborhood or in the office than you wanted.
- That might mean you have less economic stability than is comfortable for you.
- That might mean you take on some relational risk and pain as you learn to forgive and trust others.
- That might mean you step into a few more responsibilities than you can reasonably manage because you want to serve and advance God's Kingdom in our city.

But here's the deal. This has always been true – **To say yes to Jesus is to say yes to suffering.**

**GOSPEL** – After all, if Jesus Himself suffered, why wouldn't we expect the same? If Jesus Himself went to the cross on our behalf for our sin, for our guilt, to make us righteous, why wouldn't we expect a picking up of our cross?

**Hebrews 12:3 – 3 Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.**

#### **Here's the good news of the gospel:**

- **The one who calls us to suffer for Him, first suffered for us.**
- **The one who calls us to take up our cross first took up His.**

And He did so, confident He would rise again.

And we do so, confident that we too shall rise, inherit the crown of life, and never face the 2nd death.



We have the power, in the finished work of Christ, in the gospel – to step boldly into faithfulness regardless of the cost, trusting that He has gone before us, goes with us, and promises to see us through.

### **Conclusion - Polycarp**

Approximately 60 years after this letter is written by John to Smyrna, there would be a man “who would not be afraid of what you are about to suffer” and who was “faithful to death”. He was the pastor of the church in Smyrna. His name was Polycarp. He had been a disciple of John. Greatly loved and respected by the Church.

And yet one day his time had come. The soldiers came to Polycarp’s house to arrest him, but instead of fleeing, Polycarp calmly stated, “God’s will be done.”

Polycarp asked that food be brought for the soldiers, and he requested an hour for prayer. Amazed by Polycarp’s fearlessness, especially for a man his age, the hardened Roman soldiers granted his request. He prayed for two hours, asking God to receive the glory for what was about to take place.

As Polycarp entered the stadium, several Christians present heard a voice from Heaven say, “Be strong, Polycarp, and act like a man.” Because of his age, the Roman proconsul gave Polycarp a final chance to live. He just had to swear by Caesar and say, “Take away the atheists” (at that time Christians were called atheists for refusing to worship the Greek and Roman gods). Polycarp looked at the roaring crowds of Romans, gestured to them, and proclaimed, “Take away the atheists!”

Hoping one more time to persuade him to turn, the proconsul urged – “Swear by Caesar, and I will let you go. Reproach Christ!”

And before he faced the the fires of death, with his last words, Polycarp declared to the crowd – **“Eighty-six years I have served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King Who saved me?”**

And as the crowd pressed in on Him, ready to burn Him at the stake, Polycarp offered one final prayer...

**Because of this, and for all things, I praise You, O Lord God almighty. I bless You, I glorify You, through the eternal and heavenly high priest Jesus Christ, Your beloved Son, through whom be glory to You with Him and the Holy Spirit both now and for ages to come. Amen.**

***We may not all face a Polycarp death, but we can all live a Polycarp life.***

We can all give our 86 years, or however long the Lord gives us, in service to the one who will not let us down. Who will see us through the trial, who will walk with us through the testing.

And one day, when we receive the crown of life He promises, we will know – everything we suffered for His Name was worth it.

**Pray.**