

Revelation 2:8–11

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[0 : 00] I'm going to ask you to remain standing for a Bible reading today. And at the conclusion of the Bible reading, then the children will be able to be dismissed for their teen kids' ministry.

Our Bible reading today comes from the book of Revelation, Revelation 2, verses 8-11. And did the angel of the church in Smyrna write, The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. 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.

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. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

[1 : 14] The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. And you may be seated.

We come today to what I believe to be the tenderest of letters.

This letter to the church in Smyrna. Not much is known about Smyrna and the church there.

Unlike last week's letter to the church at Ephesus, which we have Luke's vast record and Paul's epistle.

Concerning the church at Smyrna, we're left to looking to things from a different sort. Sources.

[2 : 28] Primarily the text before us. And what we glean from other writings. Smyrna, like Ephesus, was a coastal city.

Smyrna was also located on the Aegean Sea, some miles north of Ephesus, and in many ways rivaled Ephesus from what writers say in regard to her natural beauty.

It was a city that was once destroyed and then rebuilt some seven centuries before the time of Christ. And that very recognition in its own local history would certainly say something to them of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ that they came on to some years later.

It is one of the contested hosts vying for preeminence regarding the birthplace of Homer, the great poet.

Indeed, what great irony there would be if the city whose favorite son was the one whose imagination captured the multitudinous nature of the Greco-Roman gods becomes the city some centuries later to which we have this record.

[3 : 57] A record not of the many gods, but the words of, verse 8, the first and the last. The one who we have already seen is the one who was and is and who is to come.

The Lord Jesus Christ. Smyrna is also, as we will hear about a little later in the message, the place of martyrdom to the bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, some years after the record that we have written here.

It's a tender letter. I believe the most tender of the seven because the situation in Smyrna was difficult.

What does Christ know of the church in Smyrna? And why the compulsion to communicate to her even after His ascension with all the things and records that had already been given?

What does He know? Verse 9, I know your tribulation and your poverty and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not.

[5 : 16] Those three words, tribulation, poverty, slander, or literally the fact of the blaspheming nature of those who are saying they are followers of God but are not.

All three words, tribulation, poverty, slander, move together. They are wedded to one another.

There is a great congregation in Smyrna that is undergoing difficult times, impoverished times, and they are being slandered as blasphemers by those around them.

That's what Christ knows of them. But notice, He knows more. Take a look at verse 10. 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. He knows that the local congregation in Smyrna in their past had been the subject of great persecution.

In their present, it was escalating. It was rising in intensity and that in its very near future, such persecution would spill over from merely some religious sectarian association or disassociation to actually the state itself from the religious sector to the Roman sector throwing some of their congregants into prison and evidently their faithfulness would be required under death.

[7 : 00] Martyrdom. That's what the Lord knows. So what can we say that Christ knows about the church in Smyrna? In a word, persecution.

Persecution in their past, their present, and their coming future. Not a persecution of a diminished sort. Not a persecution that you and I might face in an isolating kind of way, but one that for some will lead to martyrdom.

I want you to notice that the persecution develops over time, as is often the case in religious controversies. It escalates. What begins with the religious community, take a look again at verse 9, those who were called Jews and are not, or who he refers to as a synagogue of Satan, what begins in a religious community, in this case, Jewish in origin, ends up involving the Roman authorities, the very latter verse in 10 where they're actually thrown into prison.

Sectarian disagreements of such an order that the state eventually intervenes and punishes. So while we don't know much about the exact circumstances in Smyrna, we can speculate pretty well given those two very things.

When we consider other information we are given in the New Testament Scriptures, there are many other texts which begin to show what happens over time to the Christian faith in particular areas of the world.

[8 : 48] Think of it in the book of Acts. What began at Pentecost was the great working of the Spirit of God and in creating the people of God and in those early moments they were yet worshipping in the temple.

There was great interaction for a moment. Even Acts 6-7 states that many priests were being converted to the faith and this exchange was rather intimate.

Christianity was a rather Jewish thing. But over time even by the time of Nero certainly later under the reign of Domitian those tensions between Christians and Jews had now run all the way into Christianity's place in the world and these spasmodic persecutions not to be overplayed certainly but not to be underplayed either were the lot of many early followers of Jesus.

Think of it this way how this begins to emerge in even Luke's writings in Acts we see that great division begin to escalate I was thinking of Acts 13 verse 45 where we read but when the Jews saw the crowd they were filled with jealousy and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul reviling him a reviling a competitive edge began to set in between Judaism and Christianity they set one another on edge concerning the things at the center verse 50 of Acts 13 the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city and they stirred up it actually says a persecution against Paul and Barnabas and drove them out of their district chapter 14 we see a great number of unbelievers poisoning the minds it says against the brothers and so they remained for a long time speaking boldly for the

Lord but the people of the city were divided that's really the key thing that begins to happen in Acts 17 you can read of the same in Acts 26 likewise by the time you read the short letter of Jude it's obvious that certain teachers are hoping or leading Christians to deny their Lord the very piece of information that we receive from Tacitus concerning those who would turn away from God indeed the pressure mounted over time in Hebrews we see that property was confiscated of some who followed the way from Tacitus we also learn that the Jews in Smyrna built more than one temple to Roman deities and so there was this distinct relationship between a religious community and its pluralistic nationalistic community and the

[12 : 26] Christians were neither belonging to one or the other with any great amount of success and so the pressure came for Christians to conform so this is what often happens Peter writes of the same thing that when you come to faith at times they'll be surprised that you no longer run!

places in the world it breaks out into spasmodic rounds of persecution that was true it's true in the biblical record it was evidently the case then we can speculate that that was very close to the case

in Smyrna what's true in the biblical record is also confirmed in church history and interestingly confirmed in church history concerning this little city of Smyrna.

From the International Standard Biblical Encyclopedia, we read, it seems that the Jews of Smyrna were more antagonistic than were the Romans to the spread of Christianity, for it is said that even on Saturday, their sacred day, they brought wood from the fire in which Polycarp was burned. I don't know if you relate much to church history, and Polycarp, no doubt, comes on the backside of our own text, but we can begin to read back into the context of Smyrna.

This great bishop of Smyrna, recorded as an early martyr, he says before the procouncil, that is, Polycarp, when asked, swear and I will release thee, reproach Christ.

[14:43] Polycarp answered, and these are famous lines if you've ever taken a church history class, you've certainly heard them. Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never once wronged me.

How then shall I blaspheme my king who hath saved me? It's a point of record that Christians are at times persecuted for their faith.

It's in the New Testament record. It's confirmed in the record of early church history. It is the confirmed fact in large quarters of the church today.

One of the interesting things I've thought about this message today and thought, well, I wonder if my people will be able to identify with the text.

I thought, well, one never knows, given the Internet today, who might listen to this message. I've heard confirmed even this week of those who are supported by this church who are amidst deep persecutions in different parts of the world today.

[16:04] And the enemy that is battling them and threatening them and weighing heavy upon them is an enemy of belief.

It's an enemy of religious origin. The church in many parts of the world today would identify immediately with this text as part and parcel of their own experience.

This is what Christ knows of that church. And I think that's in one sense why it is such a tender letter. I've often wondered, would you like to know your future?

I don't know if I'd sign up to want to know my future. Well, the little church in Smyrna had no great ability to decline. One day they awoke and the letter carrier arrived and the words came forth from the first and the last.

The one who is, was, and is to come. And I know your present. And I know that to which you are going. And it will involve immense struggle.

[17:23] Would you say, well, thanks for the letter? Well, only if that persecution was attended by some word that enabled perseverance and some promise that kept you steadfast.

And indeed, that is exactly the way the text breaks out, doesn't it? What does Christ know? Verse 9, that they are persecuted. What does Christ say?

Verse 10, we'll see here words of perseverance. What is the result for that congregation? Well, it is an incredible, eternal promise.

What are these words of perseverance? What does He desire? Chapter 2, verse 10. Do not fear. And then look a little later in the verse, be faithful.

That's what He desires. Do not fear. Be faithful. I would say this to all the church in the world today undergoing persecution wherever they may be.

[18:29] The fear of men is perhaps the deadliest of all temptations for those who follow Christ. It was Jesus who said something to the effect, fear not those who can kill the body, only fear those who, the one who can kill you and cast you into hell forever.

He was very clear, Jesus was on distinguishing between the fear of man and the fear of God. And this little band in Smyrna needed these words at this moment.

Do not fear. I've been reading with my family over the dinner table, 1 Samuel, and we've watched Saul in contrast to the emerging David.

Saul's great downfall. Saul, he feared what the people would think. And so he accommodated and compromised his trust.

And in a sense, demonstrated that he did not fear God. These are the perfect words for this church.

[19:41] Do not fear. There is no need to fear men and there is no need to fear your future.

I say this to you as well as an indication of what God said to this church. There needs to be an abiding trust today in the church in regard to God's providence.

To paraphrase the Westminster Divines, providence is the knowledge, the apprehension in your internal marrow that God works out every detail of your life from the greatest of things to the very least of things by His most holy will for His own glory and for your good.

And so for those of you who are walking with Christ and in the midst of marginalized, maligning, accusatory, threatening perhaps, accusations, it is the providence of God that is the ballast upon which you set sail.

There is a story of two guys in the Civil War. They were fighting for the Confederacy and they were walking through the camp and they did not know one another and you could hear the cannons and the gunfire just outside the camp and bodies ravaged from the horrific nature of that early war around them and one walked through amidst the smoke and his shoulders were erect and he walked with a sense of pace and he was not rushed and his head was held high and down the dirt path came another, not an officer, but just a man in the army and he too was erect and patient and deliberative in regard to where he was going, scurrying people and noises all around and it wasn't until after they passed each other that they both turned at the identical moment to look back at the one who was so calm and catching one another's eyes, the first came to the second and said, what is the chief end of man?

[22 : 07] To which he replied, to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. And the first said, I took you for a Westminster confession of faith, man. Well, what was he saying?

I took you for a man who believes in God's providence while the world is colliding around us. No scurrying into some tent here or dodging underneath the sniper fire there.

No humor intended. Well, just a bit perhaps. No, this is what these words do.

Do not fear. Be faithful. And notice, be faithful unto death. I've come to think that this word faithful, to be faithful, it just ought to be underlined.

That is God's calling upon your life. Be faithful unto death. It's perhaps the quintessential call for the church throughout all the ages.

[23 : 20] That word, that phrase, has a greater capacity to encompass God's will for us in our activity in the world than does almost any other word or phrase.

More so than the word transformation. More so than the word being part of a movement. More so than the word of engagement. More so than the notion of being productive.

Be faithful unto death. Faithfulness is the calling upon the church.

I'll give you two models. One, you'll notice, will be more esteemed than the other. But that doesn't mean this first one goes without acclamation. Charles Simeon pastored Holy Trinity Church in Cambridge, England.

Our church is named after the church he pastored. We're kind of, we like Charles Simeon. We like Chuck. When the bishop awarded the position to Simeon, he faced serious opposition.

[24 : 32] Quote, the pews sat half empty because the people boycotted him. Simeon offered to resign, but his bishop would not let him. And after that, he sometimes found the church locked against him.

And when it opened, the pew gates were locked. And Simeon set up chairs at his own expense, but the trustees tossed them out. And for 12 years, the congregation chose other men to give the Sunday afternoon lecture.

And college students interrupted his services and passed evil rumors about him. And he was so shunned that he wrote with amazement when a fellow of the school was not ashamed to walk with him for a quarter of an hour.

And in spite of this opposition, Simeon persevered. He preached directly from the Word of God. He gradually won some of the congregation to his side. And until 30 years later, he still faced elements of opposition.

Asked how he endured, he said, quote, My dear brother, this is at the age of 71 now. I can't wait to get to be 71.

[25 : 44] My dear brother, we must not mind a little suffering for Christ's sake. When I am getting through a hedge, if my head and shoulders are safely through, I can bear the pricking of my legs.

Let us rejoice in the remembrance that our holy head has surmounted all his suffering and triumphed over death. Let us follow him patiently.

We shall soon be partakers of his victory. And there is the second person I bring before you. Jesus.

That's why he opens when he's describing himself to this particular church, the one who died and came to life. What great comfort that they would follow him.

He already has his head and shoulders through. And he will make it safe for you. Did you know in the Greek, the word for this little town of Smyrna is the word they use and translate for the word myrrh, which made me think of the end of Mark's Gospel when Jesus was on the cross and they put that sponge to his mouth with sour wine and myrrh.

[27 : 12] Or when Joseph of Arimathea came, he was going to anoint the dead body with Smyrna. This church is a rising perfume.

It's the aromas of God. Wow. Wow. What a congregation to have been a part of.

These are the heroes of our faith. Do not fear. Be faithful. Jesus will see you through.

And look what he promises. And we close with this quickly. Chapter 2, verse 10. I will give you the crown of life. What is the crown?

The crown is life. That's what happens. To the one who perseveres amidst persecution, the promise is this. Life.

[28 : 20] Life of a different sort. It was Jesus who said, I have come that they might have life. And that even though they die, yet shall they live. And not only to the church at Smyrna.

Look, verse 11. To all who hear what the Spirit says and conquer, they shall not be hurt by the second death. To all who hear.

And notice that great connection between the Spirit and the Word. What comes in verse 8 as the words of the first and the last, that is Jesus, is equated with what the Spirit says.

Word and Spirit join together. Where you have the Word of your Lord, you have the presence of the Spirit. And where you have a church that trusts and perseveres in Him without fear and in faithfulness, they shall be granted life.

And they shall not be hurt by the second death, which we will see later in the book of Revelation, chapter 20, verse 14, is the lake of fire. The eternal death. They shall escape all of that and be given life.

[29 : 44] To the church at Smyrna, the Lord knows that persecution comes to all who follow Him. Therefore, persevere, for Thou hast a glorious prize before Thee.

I'm going to pray, and then we are going to treasure our Lord's death through the celebration of the Lord's Supper. And after I pray, we'd like someone just to open those back doors, and I'd like you to go straight to a table, and if you're an elder or a deacon, find your way to a different table.

Play host. We're going to celebrate the Lord's Supper. Have a meal together. Lisa is going to read for us. We're just going to saturate our soul.

As the dinner is being served, we're going to hear Revelation 1-3 being read. And then we'll be in discussion with one another. But let me pray, and then let us, at the conclusion of my prayer, go straight back into the other room for dinner.

And when you're there and at the table, we will sing, May the Mind of Christ My Savior. So bring your bulletin with you. Let me pray. Our Heavenly Father, we thank You for this letter to this little-known church.

[31 : 08] And we know that many quarters of the world today, this would hit with such rapid, immediate relevance. And so we pray for the church around the world that she might remain faithful and without fear.

And Lord, in the midst of our meager need for such a strong calling, may we be even more bold to live in faithfulness to You.

In Christ's name, Amen.