

Revelation 2:8–11

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[0 : 0 0] Again, Revelation 2, beginning at verse 8 and reading through verse 11, this is what God's word says. And to 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. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Well, good morning. I just want to add my special welcome to you.

[1 : 1 1] And I just want to reiterate how thrilled we are that Bing and Christy Nee have the opportunity to go on sabbatical. From what he said, he has, feels like he has 25 years ahead of him having reached the age of 44.

Let me just be clear. I'm 63 and I've got a good 25 years ahead of me. So, I'm going to be going until I'm 88, Lord willing.

And I might be calling out the day where we have Bing's retirement party. Love you, man. I want to title this message, Lessons for Us from a Church Unlike Us.

Lessons for Us from a Church Unlike Us. At a surface level, there are a few offhand similarities between the cities of Smyrna and the city of Chicago.

Similarities that might make us think for a moment that they are quite a bit like us. But the title of the message is Lessons for Us from a Church Unlike Us.

[2 : 3 0] I mean, I'll grant that Smyrna was one of the three principal cities in Asia Minor, just as Chicago is one of the three principal cities within our own country.

They vied, along with Ephesus and Pergamum, for stature in Asia Minor, just as Chicago, the second city, always seems to vie with New York and L.A.

Or if you're from Houston, you want your name in there as well for significance here. Today, Smyrna, ancient Smyrna that we read of in the scriptures, goes by the name of Izmir.

It's a central city in Turkey, the third largest by population, just as ours continues to be the third largest. Today, there are three million people. I think we're somewhere between 2.6 and 2.7.

Smyrna sat along a body of water. It was the Aegean Sea. We sit along the Great Lakes.

[3 : 3 5] They had an inlet river which allowed them to bring goods to other parts of the country, just as we have a river that finds our deposits all the way down to New Orleans.

There are many things that are similar. Their ancient streets, in fact, were cut at right angles, just like ours.

Given these surface-like similarities, you might think that they are quite a bit like us. In fact, I want you to imagine this morning that we lived as Chicagoans in the ancient time that these letters were written.

Just for a few moments, picture yourself in Smyrna, knowing what you know about your city. And you're looking for a church.

This might be a church you would visit. If we did, we'd come in, and we might actually say the service was well done, and perhaps the pastor invited you to a newcomer's lunch to be held in the commons.

[4 : 42] And so after the service, you went to the newcomer's lunch, and you sat at round tables with cloth tablecloths, for Smyrna was known for all of its thread mills, and they served a nice lunch, and you wanted to hear more about the church because you were interested, perhaps, in becoming part of the church in Smyrna, just as many of you are interested in becoming part of the church here.

The pastor gets up, and the pastor says, I'm so glad you've come. I want you to know a little bit about us. There are hallmarks that define us.

There are characteristics that are unique to us. We have a reputation in the city that would, in a sense, demonstrate the DNA before you that we carry with us.

And so he pulls out a letter. He claims to be from an independent source that would give the characteristics of his ministry, and this is what he reads. Verse 9 of our text.

I know your tribulation and your poverty and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. You're there eating dessert, wondering what kind of church you've walked into.

[6 : 02] He says, let me just say a few words about these things. This is who we are. We're known to be a church in the midst of tribulations.

Well, says the pastor, really, it's like afflictions. Welcome to the church at Smyrna, home of afflictions.

We're hard-pressed. You ought to know that coming in the door. Things are difficult, not just for a few, but for the whole. We're not always well-liked.

People are deprived of certain things, but it's characteristic of who we are. If you're entering in to the church at Smyrna, welcome to a church that's characterized by tribulations, but there's more.

We're poor. By that, I don't mean poor in spirit, although I hope we are, but we're actually impoverished. There's not a lot of means in this place.

[7 : 10] There's not a lot of money here. Most people are trying to get by. We're glad you've come and hope you stay, but you just need to know that we're in the midst of difficulties, seemingly at every point along the way, and we don't seem to have the economic means to lift ourselves out of them, but there is a third characteristic that marks us.

There are many who slander against us. Now, you need to know these things coming in, says the pastor. We're defamed. There are those who emphatically are against us, speak poorly of us.

In fact, there's a thing in play that we now know concerning even the text that we're reading. This slander was a religious slander, but it had civil effect.

It was slander by a religious group, the Jews, but it put pressure on the congregation by the Roman authorities. You see, if you and I had lived in that day, you would need to know that the Jewish religion had been grandfathered in in a Roman world where they didn't have to worship the imperial cults.

And while they were grandfathered in, other religions were not. So as long as Christianity could claim itself to be under the umbrella of Judaism, while it was free from the economic deprivation if they were not going to worship all the Roman deities.

[9 : 01] But evidently, there came a moment in time, somewhere around the writing of this letter, where the Christians were trying to stay clear of worshiping the Roman imperial cult under the umbrella that were really emerging up and out of Judaism.

But at some point, the Jews said, no, you're not of us. You're not among us. And they begin then to traffic word back to the Roman authorities. And evidently, the Christian community in Smyrna was losing their financial ability to make their way in the world.

I've been to countries like this. I've met a man who taught at a university. His wife was an attorney who came to Christ as adults in a private, unnamed, home Bible study.

I know this man and his wife who both lost their jobs given the country in which they live. I know that they went from being on top to actually being on bottom, that their lives now were subsistence living.

Their farm might produce 20 eggs, but all they're allowed to keep are four. They might have other material resources, but they're all owned by somebody else.

[10 : 27] You see, there are occasions in countries even today where economics economic deprivation comes upon a Christian community through the harassment of their abiding faith in Christ.

Evidently, this is what we have as we visited this church in Smyrna. There are lessons for us from a church very unlike us.

Tribulations, poverty, subjects of slander. Well, the pastor grows quiet at the newcomers' lunch, and you and I are wondering why we ever decided to visit.

But one of you champions a hand raised. Pastor, just a comment. Given the present state of the church here, are there plans being made for revitalization?

Any ideas percolating among the congregants that would get this church on more solid footing? I mean, you obviously need some American entrepreneurial enterprise to make yourself a better way.

[11 : 46] Are there any corrective courses that are in conversation among the leadership? the pastor says, yes, we have thought about that.

It's been quite something to think about changing course. We know our marks of tribulation and poverty and slander. But he says, we have this letter from an unidentified source that has indicated our way for the future.

So yes, there are two words, he says, that will define our future as a church. And if you're entering in, I want you to know what they are. And then he reads for you, pulling out the letter, and he reads verse 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 10 days you'll have tribulation. Be faithful unto death.

Yes, these are the two words we're going to put on the sign outside the church. Do not fear. Be faithful. Yes, this is going to be our vision statement going forward.

[12 : 59] Fear not. Be faithful. The church of Smyrna welcomes all who dare enter in. Fear not. Be faithful.

I mean, look at what's there. 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 10 days you'll have tribulation. Be faithful unto death. Fear not.

Many centuries after this church letter, there was a pastor in the city of London by the name of Isaac Watts. Watts wrote a hymn, an old one that's not sung very much anymore, titled, Am I a Soldier of the Cross?

Let me read some of the lyrics. Am I a soldier of the cross? A follower of the Lamb? And shall I fear to own his cause or blush to speak his name?

[14 : 13] Must I be carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease while others fought to win the prize and sailed through bloody seas? Are there no foes for me to face?

Must I not stem the flood? Is this vile world a friend to grace to help me unto God? Those lyrics asking the question, Am I the one?

Must I be carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease? And our own heart says, yes. Yes, I am. I want to get there with ease.

Late 1940s, there was a group of college students that were finishing and meeting about what to do with their lives.

They determined to pick up from the Midwest and go to a place called Ecuador in hopes of bringing the news about Jesus to tribes that had never been told his name.

[15 : 33] One of those individuals went by the name of Jim Elliot. He's famous for some lines like, he is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.

From what I'm told or what I remember, in the oral retelling of their departure, they left the Midwest as young individuals, singles and couples, and they sang, Am I a Soldier of the Cross?

as the closing song of the beginning of their work. Am I a Soldier of the Cross?

A follower of the Lamb? And shall I fear to own his cause or blush to speak his name? So in the church in Smyrna, the word for their future was given your tribulations, given your poverty, given the slander against you, my word for your future is do not fear.

And what are you going to fear? The future sufferings that are going to come to some. not only the do not fear, but be faithful.

[17 : 00] This idea of be faithful unto death. I told you these were lessons for us from a church unlike us. Be faithful unto death.

You know, it wasn't too many years after this letter that comes to us to Smyrna that this city, Smyrna, had a bishop by the name of Polycarp.

Polycarp walks on the backside, let's say, 50 years or so from this letter. And if this letter comes to us from the Apostle John, the early textual history indicates that Polycarp was a disciple of John, which then would say he probably had familiarity with this letter and he now serves as the bishop of Smyrna and something you may not know is that he was actually martyred for his faith.

The procouncil urged Polycarp, swear, and I will release thee. Reproach Christ. And the literature indicates Polycarp answered, 80 and 6 years have I served him and he never once wronged me.

How then shall I blaspheme my king who hath saved me? And with that he's burned at the stake.

[18 : 31] Be faithful even unto death. Now, if we're at this newcomer luncheon, I'm guessing that we're all a little bit reticent and wondering if perhaps there's another church more like us that might be a good option for us.

And so, one of you raises your hand to finish the luncheon and says, Pastor, I see that you're in a persecuted state.

Pastor, I understand that that persecuted state is giving you a vision to persevere along those lines, but help me.

Why would I want to join you? for what reason would it be worth my endeavor to become a member of the church in Smyrna?

To which he then says to us, well, I've had this letter from an unnamed source that I've been reading to you, both to define for you the characteristics that define us and the vision that will hold us, but you need to know that the letter I'm reading you, the independent source that concerns these things for us, comes from none other than Jesus.

[20 : 04] And he looks at you, and he looks at me, and he says you need to understand that your membership in this church would be a beautiful thing, and let me give you three reasons. One, our church in Smyrna most closely resembles the life of our Savior.

Did you hear the words? Five of them in number? Tribulations, poverty, slander, suffering, death.

The one who had been rich became poor. The one who created the heavens and the earth and all they contained went through trials.

one who was beautiful in language and in action never lifted up his voice amidst those who slandered him.

Indeed, he became obedient by suffering even to the point of death and death on a cross. The pastor would look to us and say, there is not another church.

[21 : 19] If you want to look like Jesus, us, I can't think of a better place for you to be. Well, only slightly convinced, he says, let me say something else.

Your membership here matters because Jesus empathizes with us. It's not just that we look like him is that he meets us in our every need.

This is what he promises. Jesus says in John 16 that he who follows him will have tribulations in the world. He actually indicates that we are rich in Christ because if we have Christ, we have all things.

Indeed, you might not have two cents to your name, but if you are a Christian today, you have all the resources of heaven that will be richly enjoyed by you throughout all time into all eternity.

He empathizes with those who are like him. In fact, that ought to be an encouragement to some of us, for while I've said that this is a message on the lessons for us from a church unlike us, I'm quite aware that there are many in my midst this morning who know some measure do you not of trial, some measure of poverty, some measure of slander for your adherence and allegiance to his name, some measure of sufferings, in some parts of the world, some very real measure of death.

[23 : 09] But he empathizes with you. If you want the empathy of Christ, then you ought to embrace a church that doesn't shy away from trials, continual economic need, the slander of outsiders, the sufferings that allow us to fill up the sufferings of Christ, and like Paul, even in our own deaths, to ask that even that would be a fragrant aroma into the presence of God and he will empathize with you.

Isn't it good to know that this church not only resembled the Savior, but that the Savior empathized with the church? One more reason, says the pastor, our future is bright.

really? Trial? Poverty? Slander? Suffering? Death? He says, yes, let me read again from the letter that our church just received a couple of weeks ago from Jesus, and let me remind you that we are only one of two churches in the entire region that Jesus had no words of correction for.

know you do this well, but we are the church that resembles his ministry, our marks mimic his own, we have one who empathizes with us, and our future is bright, and then he actually pulls out the letter, and he reads again from verses 10 and 11, 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, the one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death, the crown of life, not hurt by the second death, what is the second death, you ask?

Later in the book of Revelation, he will put you before the great throne of judgment, and he will indicate that everyone will be raised from the dead, stand in the presence of God, Christian and non-Christian alike, all the deeds will be made known, and those who have given their faith and trust in Christ for the forgiveness of their sins will enter into eternal life, and that those who do not, or did not, or would not, well, they will suffer a second death, not the physical death, which we all suffer because of sin, as due payment, all the way back to Genesis, and the day you eat of it, you will surely die, physical death is the first death, the second death is much worse, the second death is the eternal separation from God on the final judgment day, and the promise to this church is that as you persevere, as you do not fear, as you continue to trumpet my name regardless of the cost, as you're faithful, you should know this, that even after death you'll be given the crown of life,

[26 : 31] I don't think this is some crown that you're going to wear around, the crown is life, it's what Paul talks about in regard to those who love is appearing, they're going to get that crown of life itself, life is the reward, it's the crown you wear, eternal life, the future says the pastor of the church in Smyrna to us today, our future is bright, it's eternal, we will never suffer the second death, we will walk the streets of heaven, enjoy the riches and wealth of the son, we will hear, well done thou good and faithful servant, rather than what have you done as a follower of the Lord, you will enjoy the fruits of life, such is his reasoning, such are the lessons, this church is one we should be excited to join, because they bear the marks of the ministry of our

Savior, this church should be one that we can't wait to join, because they experience the empathy of our Savior, this church should be one that we would wholeheartedly give ourselves to, because they have the certain promise of everlasting life, and so I say to you and me, may we more closely resemble the look of our Lord, may we more firmly commit ourselves to not living in fear to speak his name, may we be faithful, come hell or high water, you know,

Charles Simeon, a dead Anglican preacher, who passed in 1836, and should you ever reach Cambridge in England and walk into King's College Chapel, just go through the door to the center aisle, take a left, three steps, look down, you'll see in marble, C period, S period, Charles Simeon, bones are underneath, six feet under that chapel, wow, what a place he's going to rise from, he was 54 years in one church, in a university environment, 54 years in an environment like ours where he had all kinds of things through the years, and many tribulations, when he was 71, somebody asked him, how did you endure?

This is what he said, 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, isn't that beautiful?

How are you going to get through? Just get your head through, just get your shoulders through, and know that your head, our Lord Jesus Christ, has already gone through, and all the pricking on our legs will not be too difficult for us to endure.

[30 : 46] You know, my dad, and I'll close him with this, I don't know how, it's just coming to my head now, it's very different from the sermon, but I feel like you need a little relief. My dad was a basketball coach, coached many years in the NBA, and when they started doing that pick and roll thing, that high pick and roll, he was in the game at that very moment, and he would teach Larry Nance and Hot Rod Williams, along with Mark Price and Craig Elo how to do the pick and roll.

He used to tell Mark Price, you come off that high screen at the elbow, and let me tell you this, Mark, if you can just get your arm through, there might be not any room between these two defenders, but if you can get your arm through, your head will follow, your body will follow, the ball will follow, and for the last 20 years, we've watched that in the NBA every day.

Get your arm through, and everything else comes. Let me say to you, Jesus has beat the double team. Jesus, Jesus is through.

The man who cheated out to cover the top, to close entrance, he's gone through, and you can go through, and we can go through, and may the day come when we would be privileged to be in a church like this one, whose circumstances are so different than us.

these are the lessons then. We must stand firm as children of an eternal promise, come what may.

[32 : 28] We must fix our eyes on Jesus, our sure reward. We must embrace all trials.

love and love and love and love and love us. We must never be ashamed of real poverty, for indeed you are rich.

You must joyfully endure all slander, all suffering, even death, for there is laid up for you a crown of righteousness and for all who love his appearing.

our heavenly father. These letters, each one presents us a congregation that is more or less like us, but Lord, this church in Smyrna astounds us.

and when we meet their pastor face to face, and when we speak with their parishioners one day face to face, may we express to them our gratitude for their membership, for they have taught us, prepared us even, to stand as a child of the promise in an ungodly day, to fix our eyes on Jesus, come what may.

[34 : 11] May they motivate our life together, in Jesus' name, amen.