

The Church in Smyrna

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Date: 20 February 2024

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- [0 : 0 0] I've asked Suzanne to come and do our reading, and she's leapt up and is going to come and do that now. It is from Revelation chapter 2.
- I'm reading from verse 8 to 11, and I'm reading from the New International Version of the Bible.
- To the church in Smyrna, to the angel of the Lord in Smyrna, write. These are the words of him who is the first and the last, who died and came to life again.
- I know your afflictions and your poverty, yet you are rich. I know about the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.
- Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days.
- [1 : 1 8] Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown. Whoever has ears, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.
- The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death. This is the word of the Lord.
- Thanks be to God. Thank you. I just want to hold a moment with those words there.
- He or she who has an ear, let him or her hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Before I start, I just want to say I cannot think of a bigger challenge to the church.
- Across our nation just now, but particularly here in Clevedon. For us to really discern what it is the Spirit is saying to the church today.
- [2 : 3 2] And one of my prayers for this gathering has been that we might discern what the church is saying to the church together.
- What we know is that, and we have been bombarded with statistics, we thank God for those churches which show the green shoots of growth.
- But we are aware that in general the church in the West is in decline, even in America, interestingly, where we think of megachurches being the norm.
- Somebody told me in the Episcopal Church, which is pretty well a busted flush in many ways, the average size of congregation is now about 61, which wouldn't be a bad congregation in the UK.
- But in America, not so much. And not that I am trying to big up megachurches. I am simply saying to you, I think, I pray that this may be a moment when together we might listen to God and hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.
- [3 : 4 9] So this evening we are looking at the church in Smyrna. A church that was, well, let me show you some facts.
- It's about between 30 and 40 miles north of Ephesus, which was the church that we looked at last week. It takes about less than an hour on a coach to go from one to the other.

And what it was Smyrna back at the time of the early church is now the flourishing port of Izmir, which is on the Turkish coast. You can get on an airplane and fly for about three hours, and as long as your plane is going in the right direction, you will land at Izmir.

And Izmir is a big, bustling, modern port town with a kind of headland, which has got sea on three sides of it, and ancient Smyrna.

You can still visit it. There's not much of it left. There is, you know, some ruins of what they call the Agora. But there's not an awful lot to see there. There are the remains of what archaeologists think may have been churches.

[5 : 08] It's an outstanding natural harbour. It is only the third largest port, I believe, in Turkey, but it has the best natural harbour and allows ships to come and go at will without having to wait for, not that there is a big tidal surge in the Mediterranean.

Commercially today and back then, it was very, very prosperous. And we'll come back to that because Jesus tends to imply that the church in Smyrna was made up of the kind of Smyrnian underclass, the poor people.

Interestingly, the population of Smyrna was largely Jewish in the first century. If you go there today, as far as I know, there is not one synagogue left in Smyrna.

But back in the day, because it was commercially very viable and it attracted a lot of Jews excellent at business to go there and make their pile, Sity was fanatically loyal to Rome.

I mean, this is very odd, isn't it, in a way, because the Romans were an occupying army. And I think it worked a bit like it worked for the people of Jersey in the Second World War.

[6 : 40] That as long as you did kind of poke the bear, in other words, you didn't provoke the regime, by and large, the Nazis would leave you alone. And I think it was like that in Smyrna.

Obviously, being occupied has a tremendous kind of psychological drag on a population. And nobody likes it and nobody should like it, but it is potentially livable with.

And as a city, I mean, this is just a kind of side thing, it was known for the production of myrrh.

I don't know if this has any particular significance as far as our study is concerned, but our English word myrrh comes from an ancient Turkish word which sounds very like myrrh.

And it's thought that the reason the town is called Smyrna is because of the production of this very fine perfume. Incidentally, I have no idea what myrrh smells like.

[7 : 49] Does anybody know? You can't buy it over the counter in boots, I know that. I don't know what it smells like.

No? You can buy it online. You can buy it online. What can't you buy online? Thanks for the tip. So, having thought a bit about the town, let's just think about the church in Smyrna from what little we know about it.

Please come on. Try pressing the forward arrow on the computer, see what that does. There we go. It was a small congregation.

As far as we know, the numbers were pretty thin at the turn of the first century AD. We also know that it was persecuted and slandered.

Revelation chapter 2 and verse 9 were told that the risen Christ says, I know your afflictions, your poverty, yet you are rich.

[9 : 02] I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are of the synagogue of Satan. Pretty dramatic words there.

I think you would agree with me. I'm going to come back to the whole issue of the early church and slander in just a moment. It's members were poor in terms of material wealth, but Jesus describes them as rich.

And we take from that that this was a church that didn't really have great resources, but had a kind of rich spirituality, a determination to walk closely with Jesus in a context which it was very hard to do.

And I think the reference to the Christians being rich there is a reference to this kind of idea that though they were very short on material resources, they were spiritually very rich.

It reminds me a bit of the story of the Hebridean revival which took place in 1949 in the Hebrides where the church was particularly small and the group that was playing for revival was even smaller.

[10 : 30] And they were kind of a bit like, I couldn't really speak for the Church of England, but a bit like the Church of England. They're kind of growing old together. And this prayer group in the Hebrides is growing old together.

And then this remarkable thing where this dear old lady, I won't attempt her Scottish brogue, basically said, I think the Lord is coming tonight.

This was after midnight and suddenly across the island lights went on in the crofters cottages. They went outside and people were in the street convicted of their sin and seeking God's repentance.

I think what that tells you is that although, you know, I'm a minister, obviously I'm in the numbers game. But actually, what is really important is what is the spiritual quality of what is going on in your church.

You may be, you know, facing a terrible bill to re- you know, build a church tower or something horrendous or replace the roof or have the organ refitted, you know, the things that consume us at local level very often.

[11 : 50] But actually, what the Lord's interested in is what's the spiritual temperature in this church. I made a reference there to Ephesians chapter 1 and verse 3.

If you've got your Bible, it's still in the back bit. Before Galatians, sorry, after Galatians and before Philipians.

And Paul makes this extraordinary assertion to the church in Ephesus. He says, praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, not who will bless us, but who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Does anybody remember that program that used to be on the independent television network called the Beverly Hillbillies?

And basically the storyline was that there were these poor folks out in the Midwest of America scratching a living on their small holding when suddenly old Jake sticks his spade into the ground and up through the ground comes Texas gold, oil.

[13 : 14] Overnight they go from being some of the poorest people in the United States to being some of the wealthiest and like wealthy people they did what a lot of wealthy people do and moved straight to Beverly Hills into this huge mansion.

And the early days of the Beverly Hillbillies in their mansion was teaches you something if you move into a large home you need to know how to occupy it properly.

So these people were completely confused thinking that the billiards room was their dining room and wondering why it had been designed with nets in each corner and at the middle of the table.

And so they did what is understandable to me. They retreated and they basically just lived inside the kitchen. And I say that because I think that is a kind of analogy of what happens not just in our churches but to a good many individual Christians.

God has blessed us in the heavenly places with every spiritual blessing. And yet in our walk with God metaphorically speaking do we just live in the kitchen?

[14 : 33] What are those spiritual blessings? I mean we live in a culture that's very obsessed with material blessing. What are those spiritual blessings? Well God has revealed himself as a God of grace.

that means he loves you even though you don't deserve it. Someone say amen. Someone say thank you Lord. It means that a sinful soul like you can be forgiven.

Someone say amen. Thank you Lord. It means that we can be changed from the inside out.

You know from reading your magazines and switching on the television and watching the advertisements. There's an awful lot that will promise that if you take this vitamin or go on this retreat or do that you will be changed.

God's got a much more challenging but ultimately much more successful idea. And that is when we give our lives to Christ he fills us with his Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit seeks to change us from the inside out.

[15 : 57] I mean you remember don't you that one of the surprising things about Jesus was that he had it in for the Pharisees and the scribes and because of that we've kind of got them written up as the baddies in the Bible but actually they were the respectable religious establishment of their time.

These were people who prayed five times a day okay maybe they did it in public so that as many people as possible could see them. These people gave 10% of their income plus free will offerings to the local synagogue and to the cult of the temple.

These were not kind of fringe people these were people who in their own way kind of laid down their life and Jesus had to say to them the trouble with you is your religion is all about tick boxes said my prayers five times a day given my tithe tick the box tick the box but Jesus said oh very well but you're like whitewashed tombs you look good on the outside but inside you're full of decay and Jesus didn't say this but but you stink so the idea that God has blessed us not that we're striving for yet more God has blessed us says Paul in Ephesians with these amazing spiritual gifts and I pray God that one of the things we might decide maybe tonight maybe while this course is going on maybe in

God's right time we will come to the conclusion that we're sick of living in the kitchen take a look at the mansion step into it smell it enjoy it so what we also know was that this church was oppressed by and this is violent language I feel and remember last week I gave you a warning that the book of revelation of course is a kind of half volley to conspiracy theories I mean I have seen so much written about the synagogue of Satan and who they are I was once in a church in Hitchin in Hertfordshire sitting on the front row innocently where the preacher told me that the synagogue of Satan was the church of England all are welcome I've heard it apply to

Freemasonry I've heard we had a preacher come in and when I was in local church ministry he was on deputation from the church missionary society from Nigeria and he got in the pulpit and we're all thinking you know he's going to give us a talk about how he tends cows in northern northern a bit of it I mean absolutely laid into the congregation took the church in Smyrna as his text and absolutely lambasted Freemasonry I was fairly new in the church I got no idea of people in this church Freemasons or not so I kind of kept my eyes fixed firmly on the floor through most of this rant one couple left the church it was their first time there and I think it was a bit strong for them so they just went as it happened and then at the end of it this man dear man actually retired to Churchill which is not far from here is it and his name was

[19 : 56] John Daunton and John Daunton was very upper crust he said to me I rekt her he said would you care to come round for a drink he said I think I need to discuss that sermon with you I went round to his house feeling I was going to get both barrels pours me the biggest gin and tonic you have ever seen in your life and one sip of it nearly put me in the intensive care unit and he said to me what did you make of that sermon rector so I was you know what do you say I was trying to say in principle I agree he said let me stop you there he said I think we need more preaching like that I tell you I just breathed out and enjoyed the gin and tonic and went home what it seems was going on in Smyrna is that there was a group of people we don't know how many synagogues were there but sounds like these people were members of a synagogue and we don't know whether they found Christians a threat or quite what they thought but one of the things that was abundantly clear was that they were persecuting and oppressing the church of Jesus so the risen Christ in the strong language condemns this the synagogue of Satan in chapter 2 and verse 10 we read a warning which must have children

I mean remember this is already a persecuted church in a very Roman context and in verse 10 the risen Christ says to them I tell you the devil will put some of you in prison to test you and you will suffer persecution for 10 days be faithful even to the point of death and I will give you the crown of life I think I have a vivid imagination but I've often thought what if you know I found myself you know out in the Middle East and was kidnapped by terrorists and put in an orange jumpsuit and there's a video of me and there's two guys with great big swords standing either side of me and the threat was what we want you to do to the screen is disown the name of Jesus and worship the true

God Allah I've often thought to myself if I was in that situation what would I do and I imagine that those of you with a more vivid mind have wondered what you might say if you were threatened to the point of death and the risen Christ takes a rather kind of a sort of tough line on this he said you know you need to be faithful even to the point of death we have absolutely no idea quite what happened to the church in Smyrna in the immediate aftermath of this letter from the risen Christ has probably delivered to the church in Smyrna sometime around about 100

AD what we do know is that Roman governors through to about 150 AD persecuted the church quite seriously and the threat was and it probably would have been the threat to these Christians in Smyrna was you must bow your knee to the emperor and declare him as god you probably know this those of you know your Roman history that the emperor Caesar declared himself to be a god and asked people to worship him I mean you can read the great story of Daniel if you want to read another amazing story of faithfulness even unto death these were tough times for the church and Jesus said don't worry about it because you're going to suffer some more and it's going to last for ten days seems a bit arbitrary but that's what the word says and just remain faithful throughout that time and the other thing that Smyrna is really remembered for is something which

I hope you don't think is a Terry help me nothing doing on here anyway here's my point it was served by one of the early fathers of the church that is by that I mean not somebody who had children but somebody who was recognised as a there we go his name was wonderful name wasn't it Polycarp and I'm going to tell you a little more about him and in particular the fact that he was obedient even unto death and the story of his martyrdom is impressive I think I hope you'll agree with me so why do when you get older you find it difficult to turn pages over does anyone say amen to that no so church historians

[26 : 07] Chadwick in particular came up with here we go here we don't go Terry can you get the next slide up what's going on here it's going green anyway so what they put together is the six slanders aimed at the church right at this time there were six major complaints that its opponents made to the church the first one and you've probably heard about this was cannibalism they misunderstood the Lord's supper the service of holy communion the Eucharist whatever you choose to and all this talk about consuming the blood and body of Jesus kind of was hyped up by the church's opponents who accused the church of cannibalism the second thing was that the church had what they called agape feasts which simply translated means love feasts and so the accusation was that these were lust-filled orgies and they weren't just in case you ever get an invite to one so they were just a kind of meal together where people remembered all that

Christ had done for them the third thing they were accused of was family disruption the reason for that was that becoming a Christian would divide you from the rest of your family so the people who opposed us said this is what it does you become a Christian you wreck family life actually I think Christians it's only a few people on the planet today who stick up for family life even though I don't think we're very well heard the fourth thing is really mystifying the early Christians were charged with atheism and the reason for that is kind of understandable and that was Christianity rejected any images for worship or idols so because they didn't use those kind of helps to worship it was assumed that they must be atheists the fifth thing is they were disloyal citizens that was the accusation they were thought to be revolutionaries because they would not bow the knee to the name of

Caesar and therefore were thought to be people who were in grave danger of carrying out insurrection and finally they were accused of being destructive why was that because they used rather graphic language about the end times and what would happen we could read some of that in the Revelation of St John that awful things are going to happen so they were accused of being destructive people if I might just take a moment to talk to you about Polycarp you see he lived a long life he was 86 years old when he died he was a leader of the church in Smyrna and one of the earliest bishops in the church you have to decide whether that's a good thing or a bad thing but that's the way they recognised his leadership he wrote an extra canonical letter that means a letter that's not in the

Bible to the Philippians which is still we still have translations of that that can be read he was a wise and brave leader in a world where sadly persecution was the order of the day and he was martyred for his faith no there we go when he was 86 years old he was called before the local court and told that he had to disown the name of Jesus and worship polycarp said to the judge or the chair of the tribunal christ has served me well for 86 years i don't think i'm going to give up now alongside his martyrdom that what they did was they tied him to a stake built a bonfire around it and lit it and amazingly according to the stuff we have and this is backed up by the historian eusebius as well eusebius not a portuguese football player but somebody who was a historian in the early church eusebius backs it up that the fire just remained in a circle around him he's completely unharmed by it and so he got to the point where they stabbed him and they actually killed him by stabbing him in the neck i think they stabbed him 32 times and he died and he died a hero of the christian faith in the modern church if you're interested he's remembered in the modern church on the 26th of january obviously roman catholic church is quite big on remembering saves the anglican church a bit more a bit not more a bit and on the 26th of january is the day when the church gives thanks for the life and martyrdom of polycarp and then how did this happen is the patron saint of earache sufferers and that seems to me to be entirely eccentric and i've no idea why that would be but nevertheless apparently it is so there is in christ's words for smyrna and the first thing is we're told that jesus described the risen christ describes himself as the first and the last rather graphic talk for the consistent sovereignty over the church throughout the ages whatever the circumstances the risen christ says that he is aware of their afflictions still can't get this to work terry and i think i'm going to give up on it if you can't function it from up there right okay if i just fainted so the risen christ system i know your afflictions and your poverty and he knows about the slander of the synagogue of satan that i think is christ's way of saying that where the church finds itself persecuted jesus is in the midst and is with us and some of you will know because some of you in this church have had a hard time i know that and some of you have discovered that in a hard time having

jesus close to you is maybe what you would say was the primary way that kind of got you through a tough time it's mirrored isn't it in the 23rd psalm psalms are very often read at funerals which is a bit late for at least one person present you remember that verse it's a wonderful verse i treasure this verse yea though i walk through the valley of the shadow of death i will fear no evil why because the psalmist says thou art with me listen to me the presence of god in the lives of the whole christian history and the lives of all the christians who have ever stalked the planet has been that those who hold on to christ through a difficult time prevail someone say amen someone say we love that so what does the risen christ say to them you're about to find out one he says chapter 2 verse 10 don't be afraid i mean we could spend the whole evening looking at how the bible is very intent on making it clear to the followers of god in the old testament the followers of jesus in the new that we needn't be afraid i'm told never counted personally that the phrase or derivative of the phrase do not be afraid occurs in scripture 365 times once a day though you might be in trouble for 24 hours in a leap year second there is in christ's word is there's worse to come i mean i don't know how you read what's going on in the world around us just now but am i the only person in the house who thinks that it might have to get worse before it gets better and i've no idea what that worse might look like what it might feel like what it might mean for us what it might mean for our children and our grandchildren and if you're old enough your great grandchildren and christ's word to them is in the light of there's worse to come is be faithful hang on in there be faithful to the point of death we talked about that be faithful and receive the crown of life in the pastoral epistles references to the crown of life have generally meant a reference to the crown of laurel reeds that the victor in the greek games won when he won something but this is thought to be different this is thought not refer to that but refer to the fact that we shall receive life eternal if we prevail and then the risen christ seek to overcome your present trials and you will prevail i love that it's a great comfort to me as i think about the world today and the way it is and then just finally to summarize what have we learned thus far what we've learned is that firstly and i'm going back to the church in ephesus now that sound doctrine minus love means we are a clanging gong right i know churches like this i come from a very conservative tradition in the church of england and believe

[37 : 57] me it's very often there are people there who get more pleasure out of condemning people who are not like them us than they do than they do in celebrating all that christ has done for him and in particular understanding that the reason god sent his rescue plan to earth god so loved the world that he gave his only son jesus christ that whoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life amen the reason god did that john tells us in chapter 3 verse 16 because god loves the world i wish i loved it as much as god did i mean i find myself moving into grumpy old man mode often complaining about the way things are but god loves it tells us in the pastoral epistles that it's god's will that all should be saved it doesn't mean that all will be saved but it's will it's his will that all should be saved but we've also learned that love minus doctrine equals compromise you can't be you can't guarantee the safety of the ship if the anchor doesn't work and you can't guarantee the health and safety of the church if the bible is not taken seriously and its authority in our lives and if you look in you know when paul was writing to this young church leader in first timothy in chapter six and verse three i mean this makes it entirely clear to me verse three if anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our lord jesus christ and to godly teaching he is conceited and understands nothing it may be nice to think that you know we can all believe whatever we like but that's just a free for all that's not a church by any new testament standards and then what we what we've learnt is that doctrine in the context of love is a healthy church what kind of church would you like to belong to would you like to belong to one that's sick incidentally i remember david watson used to say that you can always tell a sick church he said it's always got a thermometer outside it and what we've learnt is in ephesians is that the threat to a loveless church is jesus says i will remove my lampstand that is he will remove his presence so you remember i thought about that terrible time in the history of the old covenant people of god when in ezekiel chapters 10 and 11 you can read the glory of the lord departed from the temple you'll have no idea what that would have meant for a jew at the time the glory of the lord has departed amazing and we've learnt that to those who prevail the gift let me stress that the gift of eternal life dallas willard said grace means the end of earning you don't have to earn your way into heaven but it doesn't mean the end of effort because we've been saved for the good works that god has prepared in advance for us not saved by our good works and the final thing

we've learnt is and we learnt this tonight if i might just read to you from chapter 2 and verse 11 get my bible the right way up i have a fighting chance sorry lost my way lost my place yes so here it says he has an ear let him hear what the spirit says to the churches he who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death that is unless the lord returns we will all die physically don't know what do you think about that but unless the lord returns we will all die it unites us in the house tonight but what the jesus is saying is a very contemporary idea amongst jews was that the second death was the judgment of god on sinful people and what he's saying is if you prevail if you stay faithful despite the provocation despite the slander despite the persecution then you will avoid the second death you will not avoid the judgment of god but if i can put it in airport language if you've prevailed and trust to christ you know when you get to the customs hall there's a green lane and a red lane right does anybody ever go down the red lane not so on the day of judgment jesus himself said the road to perdition is wide you want to avoid that road trust christ and prevail in him well friends that's it for now and i hope you come back next week and don't let the recording put you off coming i'm watching you