

# The Seven Letters (3): The Church in Smyrna

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] We're going to read now in Revelation chapter 2, Revelation chapter 2, this is on page 1028 of the Pew Bible.

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And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, the words of the first and 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're 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 will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.

He who is anear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death. Heavenly Father, we bow in your presence. May your Word be our rule, your Spirit our teacher, and your greater glory, our supreme concern, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

[ 1 : 3 1 ] The church in Smyrna. There is no continent on the planet, no country in the world, where you cannot find a living Christian church. It may be largely hidden, perhaps we don't hear much about it, but the Christian church is global. The Christian church is growing. Over the last few weeks, I've heard a couple of expressions which have made me think more deeply about some of the situations the church finds itself in. A few weeks ago, Peter Morrison coined the phrase, the church on the wrong side, which talks about Christians who find themselves fighting for armies which we might consider hostile. This week, it was reported that Russia have lost a half a million men in their war against Ukraine. It is inconceivable that there is not among those half a million men a number who are Christians.

Someone else talked about a church on the margins, a reference to churches which are marginalized by their societies, perhaps other than like the way evangelical Christians like ourselves are treated in Scotland today. But when it came to the church in first century Smyrna, it was a church under pressure, a church under pressure. It wasn't ignored like we are today. It was actively persecuted. It was under intense pressure and was threatened with destruction. Now, Smyrna is located in western Turkey and is known today as Smyrna. It was a large and prosperous Roman colony. It was the first city in that region to declare its loyalty to Rome and became an important center for emperor worship. In common with many other Roman cities, it had a sizable Jewish colony and it was from this Jewish colony the pressure upon the church. Thirty years ago, many Christian leaders in Scotland predicted that the evangelical church would be persecuted by our society. It hasn't happened yet. We're still at the stage of being a church which is very much in the margins, but a day may come when we move to becoming a church under pressure. When as Christians, we'll be forced to take a costly stand. Our forefathers, the Scottish Covenanters, took this stand when their church was under pressure. And you can find their gravestones all over the desolate moors of the southern Uplands. They paid the ultimate price for the freedom of the gospel in Scotland. And there may come a time when we also are called to pay that ultimate price.

Our church may come under pressure and Christ will call us to stay faithful and to hold fast, yes, even unto death. The early North African church father Tertullian once said, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.

Who knows what kind of church our blood may seed? We're not there yet. We're nowhere near there yet, but there are Christians all over the world who are. Nigeria, North Korea, sub-Saharan Africa.

[ 5 : 10 ] Now, these are churches under pressure. They're where the church in Smyrna was 2,000 years ago. However, there are certain situations in which it's not death to die, and this is one such. When the church is under pressure from outside, it is not in danger of destruction. It is never more alive than when it suffers, because then the risen Christ draws close and fills it with His eternal life.

Now, there's much that we can learn from the church in Smyrna, a church of which Jesus says nothing negative at all, but sympathizes with it and stands alongside it as it suffers, promising it eternal life through temporal death. The one who dies for Christ now shall live for Christ, shall live with Christ forever. Though today we're a church in the margins, tomorrow we may become a church under pressure, and the question for us is this, will we be faithful unto death? Will we hold fast to Jesus, even though it costs us our lives? I want us to see two things about this church under pressure.

First, it's a church sentenced to die, but secondly, it's a church promised to live. Now, this letter sounds rather gloomy, does it not? But in fact, it's the most cheerful of them all.

After all, would you rather be a member of the church in Laodicea, threatened with spiritual death, or the church in Smyrna, promised spiritual life? First of all then, a church sentenced to die, a church sentenced to die. It is estimated that a Christian is murdered for his or her faith in Jesus every two hours in sub-Saharan Africa. Not reported by the Western news agencies, but Christians are being slaughtered. According to the House of Commons Library, Independent, one in seven Christians across our world today are persecuted for their faith, most in Africa or Asia.

This is nothing new. The early church was under even more pressure, with Jews and Romans combining forces to attempt its complete destruction. All of the apostles of Christ, without exception, were put to death for their faith in Jesus. Peter was crucified upside down in Rome.

[ 7 : 44 ] James was run through with the sword. Paul was beheaded. John, the apostle who wrote Revelation, was at that time exiled to the remote island of Patmos, Alcatraz of the day, on account of his faith in Christ. The heavenly Christ uses a suffering apostle to write to a suffering church.

That's often the way it is, is it not, that those who are of most use to suffering Christians are those who themselves have suffered the most. Those who are of most use to suffering Christians are those who have suffered themselves the most. We might think that we suffer here as Christians in the UK because the media mocks us and our fellow citizens think we're stupid to believe what we do. The truth is, we don't even begin to know what it's really like to suffer for Christ. By contrast, these Christians in Isver, Smyrna, knew only too well what it meant to suffer and die for Jesus. Christ's letter to them begins in verse 9,

I know your tribulation. Christ was intimately aware with the tribulations, the painful situations they faced, the afflictions they had to endure on a daily basis. They were oppressed and distressed, afflicted and troubled.

Of course, it's no more than Jesus predicted back in John 16, 33. In this world, you will have tribulation, tribulation, he said. Here's the mark of the faithfulness of the church, that in the face of a hostile society, they will endure tribulation and affliction. They'll not bend to conform.

They'll speak truth to power and they'll suffer for it. In the first instance, the church in Smyrna was troubled by its poverty. Economic persecution was rife. Businesses owned by Christians were blackballed.

The shops were empty. People were pressured not to buy their goods and services from Christians. So Christians lost their businesses, their incomes, their homes. They became refugees.

[ 10 : 08 ] They became the poorest of the poor. That's the way it is for many Christians in our world today. Where governments put pressure on people not to use Christian businesses and services.

A little like 1930s Germany, where German citizens were commanded not to buy their goods from Jewish shops. Secondly, the church in Smyrna was slandered, verse 9 again. Lies and deceptions were told about them.

They're portrayed in the most negative light possible. Their practice of communion, where they ate the body of Christ and drank the blood of Christ, led to them being called cannibals. The Jews called them heretics, worthy of death.

One couldn't miscall the emperor of Rome, but Christians were fair game for dishonor. To use modern language, they were entirely cancelled.

Their voices were silenced. They were made into a ghastly caricature, a little like 1930s Germany. Where Jews were called a virus, proliferating like rats.

[ 11 : 22 ] Poisoning the purity of Aryan society. Thirdly, many of the Christians in the church in Smyrna were imprisoned. On trumped-up charges, they were prosecuted, condemned.

They shared their prison cells with thieves, rapists, and murderers for no other crime than that they dared call Christ Lord. Many of the very earliest Christians in Judea were imprisoned through the relentless persecution of a young Pharisee named Saul of Tarsus.

The apostle Paul was, the apostle John rather, who wrote this letter, was enduring a type of imprisonment on the Alcatraz-type island of Patmos.

Prisons in many parts of our world today are filled with Christians. You'll find them in jails in Iran and in North Korea for no other crime than that they followed Jesus as Lord.

And then fourthly, implicit in this letter, is that some of the Christians in Smyrna will be put to death. They'll be executed. Some will become victims of lynch mobs orchestrated by religious Jews.

[ 12 : 33 ] Others, arrested by the Romans and publicly executed. According to Roman historians, secular historians, Christians were burned alive and their bodies used as human torches to light the streets of Rome.

Others were covered in animal skins and eaten alive by wild beasts in Roman amphitheaters. The Colosseum in Rome may be a popular visitor attraction today, but in the first few centuries AD, it witnessed the public execution of thousands of Christians.

Before this letter of Revelation had even been written, under the reign of Emperor Nero, the apostle Paul had been beheaded in Rome, and the apostle Peter had been crucified upside down in Rome. Christians were the victim of a holocaust. And over the centuries, Christians have continued to be victims of a holocaust. Many of us here dearly love the Book of Common Prayer.

Its language, largely written by the English Bishop Thomas Cranmer, friend of John Knox, is spiritually rich and spiritually satisfying. Thomas Cranmer was executed by burning under the reign of Queen Mary I of England.

[ 13 : 52 ] Just before this, Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley, again both outstanding reformers in the Church of England, were executed by burning for their gospel zeal and faith in Jesus Christ.

Never mind England. We've got our own list of Christian martyrs here in Scotland. Patrick Hamilton was burned to death for his faith in Christ in St. Andrews.

It took him six hours to die. George Wishart was another famous figure burned at the stake in St. Andrews.

It is estimated that nearly 16,000 Christians were executed during the covenanting struggles in 17th century Scotland. Two of the most famous, of course.

We know them as the Two Margarets of Wigton. They were executed by drowning in the waters of the Solway Firth. Now, for over 300 years, we Christians have been free to practice our faith in Scotland publicly and without fear of persecution.

[ 14 : 56 ] But who knows how much longer we shall have this freedom? Shall we, along with our predecessors in Smyrna, be impoverished and slandered and imprisoned and executed?

Smyrna was a church condemned to die. And behind it all, as we read in verse 9, was Satan.

He was working through the Jewish synagogues. He was stirring up hatred against the Christian church for it's through the church all the things Satan hates are being accomplished.

God has been glorified by worship and by mission, by faithfulness and by perseverance. Satan's behind all the persecution, even as he's behind the persecution of Christians by other religious groups all over our world today.

Perhaps, though, the most famous martyrdom in all of Christian history took place in the city of Smyrna. In his younger years, Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna had been a disciple of the Apostle John.

[ 16 : 11 ] Same John who wrote these words in the book of Revelation. In 155 AD, Polycarp was burned to death for his faith in Jesus.

One of Polycarp's disciples was the early church father Irenaeus of Lyon in present-day France. And Irenaeus wrote these words about Polycarp.

He said, I could tell you the place where the blessed Polycarp sat to preach the Word of God. He said, it's yet present to my mind with what gravity Polycarp came in and went out.

What was the sanctity of his appearance? The majesty of his face? And what were his holy encouragements to the people? And he says this, I seem to hear him now as he relates how he talked with John and many others who had seen Jesus Christ.

The words he had heard from their mouths. In AD 155, Polycarp was arrested, tortured, and then burned at the stake.

[ 17 : 25 ] While being burned, he was urged to renounce his faith in Jesus. But he replied, as many of you know it's famous, Eighty and six years I have served him, and he has done me no wrong.

How then can I slander my king and saviour? You threaten me with fire for a season. And after a little while, that fire's quenched. But you are ignorant of the fire of everlasting punishment that is prepared for the wicked.

Paulie Carp, Bishop of Smyrna. A historical proof of Christ's letter to this church. A Christian who was faithful and held fast to his faith until the very end.

A Christian for whom it was not death to die. A Christian whose marked blood was the seed of the church all over the world, even to today. Now they say, of course, the world has moved on since the first century.

But when it comes to the pressure the church is under, nothing has changed. As I said, a Christian dies for his or her faith in Jesus every two hours in sub-Saharan Africa.

[ 18 : 39 ] Christianity is the most persecuted religion in the world today. It is a church which is under pressure, affliction, and distress.

It is quite literally sentenced to die. As a challenge, let me read some words of John Piper I read this week.

There is a great gulf between the Christianity that wrestles with whether to worship at the cost of imprisonment and death.

And the Christianity that wrestles with whether the kids should play soccer on a Sunday morning. That hurts. A church sentenced to die.

Second, a church promised to live. A church promised to live. So, the church in Smyrna is under pressure from the society in which it's found.

[ 19 : 38 ] It's got no friends. No one can come to its defense. But greater is he who was with them than the thousands against. Greater is the exalted king of Revelation, one than all the kings and governors and rulers of this world.

The chief comfort of the church in Smyrna was not a religion, but a person. The Jesus Christ who wrote this letter.

The Jesus who knew their situation. Who promised them eternal life through temporal death. The church was condemned to die by the world. But Christ promised it would live.

You'll notice how Christ introduces himself at the beginning of this letter. The words of the first and the last who died and came to life. This is taken directly from Christ's self-description in Revelation 1.17.

When he says to the apostle John, Fear not, I'm the first and the last. I'm the living one. I died and behold, I'm alive forevermore. On the night before his crucifixion, Jesus said, I am the way, the truth, and the life.

[ 20 : 47 ] You know, most of Jesus' I am sayings are heavily focused on the life Jesus gives us. And we dare not forget what Jesus said to his people. I have come that you may have life.

And life in all that's plenty, in all that's abundance, in all that's fullness. Jesus does not promise the church in Smyrna that holding fast to him in faith and trust will not lead to the physical deaths.

In verse 10, he calls the church in Smyrna to be faithful unto death. The first minister of Milton Free Church, which is one of the constituent members of Glasgow City Free Church, which is the constituent, along with Partick, of Crow Road Free Church, was an Aberdonian genius.

Don't know any others like that, do you? Called John Rabbe Duncan. Now, Duncan was converted to Christ in 1826 under the preaching of a German, a Genevan evangelist called Caesar Milan.

In 1832, Milan wrote a hymn that has become very famous. It begins this way. Remember, this is the man through whom Rabbi Duncan was saved.

[ 22 : 03 ] It is not death to die, to leave this weary road and join the saints who dwell on high, who found their home with God.

For the church, under the kind of severe pressure of Smyrna, there could be no better motto, it is not death to die for Christ.

Earlier, we spoke about Thomas Cranmer, the archbishop burned to death for his faith in Christ. After his initial trial, Cranmer initially recanted his position and reaffirmed his belief and membership of the Roman Catholic Church.

He backed down under the pressure of death. But later, he again changed his mind, recanting his recantation and pledging himself to the Reformed faith.

He was immediately sentenced to death. When the flames grew around him, he was being burned at the stake. Cranmer plunged his right hand into the flames, that right hand he had used to sign his recantation from the Protestant faith.

[ 23 : 17 ] His last words were these, Lord Jesus, I see the heavens open and you standing at the right hand of God. Cranmer realized that when our faith in Jesus is at stake, it is not death to die.

It is not death to die for Christ because he has promised us life. Christ, the first and the last, the living one who was dead and is alive forevermore. He died on the cross and now lives in resurrection, power and glory.

That is what he promises to all who will lay down their lives for him. He promises them saying, be faithful unto death and I'll give you the crown of life. Jesus does not just promise them life.

He promises them the crown of life. Now these are names, these are words we know from names we give to our children. The Greek word we translate as crown is the English word Stephen, Stephanos.

And the Greek word we translate as life is the English name Zoe. So next time you speak to Stephen Strong or Zoe Szykowski, remember the promise of Christ and I will give you the crown of life.

[ 24 : 41 ] It's the crown given to victors, those who have conquered their enemies because they remain faithful to Christ even unto death. We shall wear the crown of life because we are disciples who follow the Jesus who for a time wore a crown of thorns.

Now because Jesus has been raised and exalted, he wears that crown and he shares it with us.

The second death, the judgment of condemnation will not touch us because our King and Lord endured it for us on the cross and conquered it by his resurrection.

We shall not just live with Christ, but that life itself shall be the golden crown of the victor while those who persecuted us, those who mocked us, those who spat upon us and belittled us, those who put us to death shall wear the eternal crown of shame and punishment.

What a prospect for Christians today who even now are losing their lives for Christ, those slaughtered children of God all over the world whose murders will not go unpunished are ascending to a new level of existence where life will shine and the glory of Christ will fill them with the majestic light of God.

What a prospect. What a promise. How then should we live? Let's go back to these words of John Piper because I want to drive them home to us today.

[ 26 : 23 ] There is a great gulf between the Christianity that wrestles with whether to worship at the cost of imprisonment and death and the Christianity that wrestles with whether the kids should play soccer on a Sunday morning.

If that is the biggest pressure you face as a Christian, something as pathetic as that, whether to allow your kids to play soccer on a Sunday morning rather than come to church, take a really, really good look at yourself in the mirror and ask whether you know Jesus at all.

Because the Jesus who died for us is worth far more than that. He gives us two commands. First of all, he says, do not fear, verse 10. It is natural for us to be filled with fear at the thought of persecution.

But if we focus more on Jesus, the giver of life, and the promise he gives us of the crown of life, our fears will be overwhelmed by the grace of Christ and the hope of the gospel.

Knowing Christ and loving Christ will give us the courage to be burned at the stake for six hours if needs to be. We remember always, it is not death to die.

[ 27 : 45 ] The second is this, be faithful unto death. Be faithful unto death. If people are willing, and they are, you see it in the telly all the time, to die for their false faiths and ideologies, surely we're willing to be faithful to the Lord Jesus who was willing to pay the ultimate price for us.

How sad a thing it is, and you can tell it kind of angers and grieves me, can't you? When professing Christians aren't even willing to give up their kids' sport on a Sunday morning for Christ.

This is not a hypothetical criticism. We've had professing Christians leave our church before for this very reason. My kids' football got in the way.

If we're not willing to give up these paltry and pathetic things for Jesus, how will we ever be faithful unto death for Him?

