

Revelation Extra: The Church at Smyrna

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Date: 12 October 2020

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[0 : 00] and to the angel of the church at Smyrna, right? 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 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 God's Word. Can I ask you now to please pray for me?

And let's pray together that God would speak to us. Like, that's why we're here, right? We want God to speak. And so let's ask Him to do that. Let's pray. Father, so thankful that You have given us Your Word.

[1 : 06] These are Your words. In these moments, we're not here to listen to a talk. We're here to encounter the living God.

And You meet us here in Your Word by Your Spirit. And so come, speak to us with power, with boldness, with clarity.

Help us see what we cannot see in our own lives. Give us illumination by Your Spirit. Strengthen us and encourage us in Jesus.

And it's in His name that we pray. God's people said, Amen. Amen. You may be seated. Can you imagine living in a jungle of fear when all you had to do was walk out to freedom?

Can you imagine living in a jungle of fear when all you had to do was walk out to freedom? That was exactly the real-life situation of a man named Hiro Onoda.

[2 : 11] Hiro was an imperial soldier deployed to the Lubang Island in the Philippines in December of 1944. Now, because He was an intelligence officer, He was given strict orders that under no circumstances are you to surrender.

After about three months or so on the island, He and three others were the only ones still alive. And so they fled deep into the jungle.

There they survived on bananas and coconut milk and stolen cattle. And they were constantly in a state of fear. They had no idea if they would ever go home.

They had no idea if they would make it out alive. They had no idea when the next fight with local police would occur. This is how they lived. And it went on for several months until finally something historically significant happened.

You will remember, it was the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima in August of 1945. The war was in effect over.

[3 : 20] Japan would surrender. But Hiro was still somewhere deep in the jungle. They dropped leaflets all over the island saying that the war is over.

Those of you that are in hiding can come out. You can come out to freedom. But Hiro refused to believe it. He thought it was some kind of a trick. He didn't think it could actually be true.

And so even though he could have walked out to freedom, he intentionally chose to live in the jungle afraid. News eventually gets back to Japan.

His superior officer will fly to the island and give him direct orders to come out and come home.

And upon hearing those words of his commanding officer, he finally left the jungle and walked out into freedom. Are you ready for this?

[4 : 32] 29 years after the war was over. That's crazy.

Can you imagine for 29 years the war's been over but you're still living like a prisoner? For 29 years all you had to do was walk out of the jungle to freedom.

And as crazy as that sounds, it's not uncommon. Because I think, dear friends, that's where most Christians, myself included, live far too often.

We live trapped in this jungle of fear. What are they going to say about me? What are they going to do to me? What will they think about me? Will I get through this?

And we never actually walk out into the freedom that is ours because we can't fathom what it would actually mean to live in the victory of Jesus.

[5 : 41] And my friend, if the book of Revelation is intended to do anything at all, it is not to give you content for a prophecy conference.

It is to assure the Christian that victory was won at Calvary and therefore you have nothing to fear. That is why this book is given to us and it is exactly what Jesus says to the church at Smyrna.

Look at it. Look how the letter starts in verse 8. And to the angel of the church in Smyrna, write the words of the first and the last who died and came to life.

This introduction of this letter starts with a declaration of victory. Jesus wants this church to know. Jesus wants our church to know.

[6 : 47] Jesus wants every church to know He's the first and the last. He died and rose again. He is risen.

Now you need to understand that there's a lot of play on words in this letter and there's something that the original readers would have connected this with that we need to also understand.

You see, Smyrna had actually existed about a thousand years before this. In the 6th century B.C. it was completely destroyed. Complete ruins.

And then around 280 B.C. it's rebuilt and it is beautiful. It is affluent. It is a gorgeous city. And because of this, many had given Smyrna the symbol of the phoenix.

Are any of you familiar with this symbol? In Greek mythology, it's the symbol of rebirth. You have new life coming up out of the ashes. In other words, faith family, this was a city that had literally died and come back again.

[7 : 54] Meaning, the original readers would have clearly understood what Jesus is saying. Namely, let your city be a reminder of me. I am the resurrection and the life.

Christians, we of all people know this. Death doesn't have the final word. Amen? You get fired up, I'm going to get fired up for you. This morning, if you have recently lost a loved one who was a Christian, if you've recently been at a funeral of someone who knew Jesus, let me tell you that death will not, death has not had the final word.

Jesus is the first. Jesus is the last. He died and rose again. But this declaration of victory is not just for the church at Smyrna.

In fact, you see it in every church. Every letter of the seven letters ends with that phrase to the one who conquers. And not only that, one of the main chapters in the book of Revelation is chapter 12. And in there, you talk about some imagery, there is some graphic symbolism. What you find there is you have a woman that is about to give birth to a male child. Waiting on that male child is a dragon waiting to devour that child.

[9 : 21] Not exactly what you find on most Christmas cards. And yet, it's exactly Christmas. You have from this woman, Israel, the promised Messiah, Jesus, and waiting to destroy Him is Satan.

That's why at Christmas, Herod is trying to kill babies. Because Christmas is not all is calm, all is bright. It is a declaration of war.

But notice what John says happens as a result of this male child coming. Look at Revelation chapter 12 and verse 10. This will get you excited. I heard a loud voice in heaven saying, Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ has come.

For the accuser of our brother has been thrown down who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered Him by the blood of the Lamb, by the word of their testimony, for they love not their lives even to death.

The point, faith family, is this. In chapter 2, verse 8, in all those verses to all seven churches, to chapter 12, throughout the book of Revelation, it is saying this glorious truth.

[10 : 47] Christians do not live for victory. We live from victory. We do not fight for victory. We fight from victory.

Jesus was dead and came back to life. He is the first and He is the last. Christ. That is a declaration of victory that we need to embrace and celebrate today.

Now why, why would Jesus start the letter this way? Why would you make such a declaration of victory right out of the gate? And I need everybody here, Lakeville venue, everybody. because sometimes you feel like you're losing.

Amen? Christian, have you ever been there? Have you ever found yourself discouraged when you look at the world around you and say, I know about this victory, I just don't see it.

[11 : 55] can you imagine what your hope would be if it were based purely on your emotions? Or what it would be if it were based purely on the circumstances of your life?

Or, heaven forbid, it were based purely on the headline news. In other words, sometimes we look at the world around us and we need to be reminded of the victory we have in Jesus and that is particularly true when your faith is being persecuted.

That's exactly what's happening in Smyrna. Verse 9, now Jesus starts the evaluation, I know, remember I'm the one that walks among the seven lampstands, I know my church more than the church knows itself, and here's what I know about you church at Smyrna, I know your tribulation and your poverty and the slander of those that say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

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 ten days you will have tribulation.

And Jesus says, here's what I know about you, I know your suffering. Now, it's important to understand to be faithful to the text, we're not talking about general suffering, we're talking about suffering related to being a Christian.

[13 : 29] You're suffering because you're a follower of Jesus and he describes it in three ways. I'd encourage you to underline these in your Bible. Number one is poverty, that is, they're struggling financially.

Two is slander, that is, verbal persecution. And three, prison, that is, physical persecution or basically death. Prison in those days was not waiting to see what the verdict would be, prison was the verdict.

You were just waiting for death. And Jesus says, I know this is true about you. Now, for those of you that are nerds and love all the background and stuff, and we have a few of those, I won't point them out, right?

I want to give you a little bit of the background as to what's actually happening here so you'll understand kind of the depths of their persecution. Do you see the phrase in verse 9, those who say that they are Jews and are not?

That's a really important play on words in terms of the history here. So, follow me. After Augustus Caesar dies in 14 AD, he was loved so much, the Roman Senate voted to make him God-like.

[14 : 44] They wanted to celebrate him. But then that gets blown out of proportions when Caligula in the 80-30s comes along and he's psycho.

I mean, he's cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs. He is a madman. And he takes this even a step further and he says, I'm not God-like. I am God and not just me but also my horse.

And I'm all for horses but that's a little much. You will worship me and my horse. So, what became very common in Roman society was what was known as emperor worship.

And so serious was this that if you failed to worship the emperor it was considered an act of treason. Now, for reasons that I do not have time to explain, the Jews were given an exemption from this.

They didn't have to worship the emperor. And most Romans at this time thought that Christianity was a sect or a group of Judaism.

[15 : 53] And you'll remember because you've read the book of Acts, right, that the Jews hated Christians. In fact, most of the persecution that Christians faced in the early church was not from society.

It was from Jewish leaders. Why? Because they accept Gentiles. Gross. They think Jesus is the Messiah.

They don't follow the law and all the customs. And so they didn't like Christians, which means, right here, all they had to do to persecute Christians was tell the Romans they're not Jews.

The bullseye would then be on their back. No one would hire them or buy things from them.

Poverty. They would ridicule them.

Slander. And if they did not bow the knee to the emperor, prison and death. Now there's a bit of an irony here if I can use that word.

[17:10] Namely, that the ones saying Christians aren't Jews are actually the ones who aren't Jews. You say, what do you mean? I don't understand.

Here's what I mean. The Bible is clear that true Jews are those that have the faith of Abraham. A circumcision not of the flesh but of the heart.

In other words, do you realize, faith family, that you could be a Jew ethnically and not be a Jew biblically? Oh, don't take my word for it.

Listen to what the Apostle Paul says with enormous clarity. Romans chapter 2 verse 28. For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical.

But a Jew is one inwardly and circumcision is a matter of the heart by the spirit, not by the letter.

[18:11] That is, the law. And people will ask me sometimes, and some of you may not get into this, but some will ask me, do you believe the church replaces Israel? Is that what you're saying? That the church has replaced Israel?

Here's my answer. No, no, no, no, no. Have I been clear? What I'm saying is what the Bible teaches, namely Jews that do not believe in Jesus are not Jews.

Jews can't wait to see my inbox this week. Because true Judaism in the Old Testament and the New has always been about faith in the seed of Abraham.

Abraham! And if you think that's controversial today, imagine preaching that then. And so Christians in Smyrna are facing serious persecution.

persecution. Now, I don't know if you feel this way, but I always feel this way when I preach a sermon like this on persecution because of your faith.

[19:39] And there's always a bit of a disconnect. Do you feel that? Because as Christians in America, we don't really experience a lot of persecution.

Although, I think if you're honest about the direction of the culture, that's changing at least verbally. I shouldn't say changing. It's changed. And likely will continue.

But it doesn't reach the physical level, at least not yet. And so what we tend to think in passages like this is we run to North Korea and we run to the Sudan and we think about Christians that are suffering real physical suffering like the Christians in Smyrna and we tend to think, well, it doesn't really apply to me.

By the way, you should pray for Christians around the world who are facing that kind of suffering. But my point is to say we tend to have a disconnect and I'm saying we shouldn't.

Because if I haven't been controversial enough, I'm going to push you a little further. Here's the point to bring it into our life.

[20:48] Are you ready? persecution at some level is the reality for every Christian. Or let me say it, that wasn't quite controversial enough.

Alright? Let me say it a different way. You are probably not a Christian if you don't face persecution at some level for being a Christian. There, I said it.

You are probably not a Christian if you never face persecution at some level for being a Christian.

You say, alright big old boy, if you're going to make comments like that, you better back that up.

Okay. I'll give you three reasons why I think I'm on firm biblical ground to make that statement.

Number one, the book of Revelation.

What do you mean? I told you last week that the number seven, there are more than seven churches in Asia Minor. Seven is symbolic. You know that.

[21:46] It's a number of completion. That is, these are seven actual churches, but the number seven means it represents all churches at all time. Meaning, this is not just an issue for Smyrna.

It's an issue for Berean. It's an issue at every church at some level. That's number one. Number two, the Beatitudes. Oh, I wish I had a lot of time here.

I don't. But let me just show you something that I think is really important for you in this very familiar passage of Scripture. Look at Matthew chapter 5. You'll notice it on the screen in verse 3.

This is the first Beatitude. Verse 3 says, Blessed are the poor in spirit for, now say this with me, Lakeville venue, everybody, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Remember that. Now look at verse 10. It's the last Beatitude. Verse 11 is just an extension of verse 10. Watch what it says. Blessed are those who are for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

[22 : 50] Huh. The first one says theirs is the kingdom of heaven. The last one says theirs is the kingdom of heaven. You nerds are going to love this.

It's called an inclusio. You don't need to remember that other than to remember this point. You have to take the Beatitudes as a unit. You don't get to pick and choose.

Well, I think I'll have some mercy and some hunger for righteousness, but I don't want the persecution one. You don't get that option. It's an inclusio. In fact, it's a description of what the Christian life is.

Namely, you're not a Christian until you come to the point of poverty of spirit. nothing in my hands I bring, simply to the cross I cling. I have nothing by which I can save myself.

I am poor. And what do you do as a result of that? You mourn. You weep. You're broken. And you're at a place of meekness and humility seeking, hungering for a righteousness that's not of yourself, but a righteousness of someone else.

[23 : 54] And then what do you do? You plead for mercy. And you receive it. And as upon receiving it, you're pure of heart. That is, you're devoted to Jesus alone. He's the one that you love.

And because he's the one that you love, you take serious telling other people about him, which is peacemaking. That is, sharing the gospel of peace, that man and God might be reconciled together. And if you share the gospel, you will be persecuted. persecuted. You don't get to pick and choose. Jesus saying, this is the life of the graced ones, those that have experienced the transforming grace of God. Here's the third reason I think I'm on biblical grounds to make such statements like I've just made.

And I could have just said this and it would have been enough, but what's the fun in that, right? Right? Here's the third reason. It's just the clear statements of Jesus and Paul.

[24 : 59] What does Jesus say in John 16? In this world, you will have tribulation. Take heart, I have overcome the world.

Sounds a lot like Revelation 2, right? Same author. Or what about what Paul says to Timothy in 2 Timothy chapter 3? Those who desire to live godly will be persecuted.

The point is very clear, faith family. Are you listening? Persecution is a class you can't skip. Now, the level and degrees vary.

I'm not suggesting that what Christians face in Sudan is the same as what we face here in terms of degree. But persecution is no less true for any Christian in any culture.

Let me summarize it this way. Let me give you two reasons why the gospel is going to guarantee persecution first.

[26 : 07] And it's this. Because the gospel poses a personal threat in every culture. In other words, the reason why the Christians in Smyrna, listen, faith family, are being persecuted, are being persecuted, why they're facing tribulation, is because they refuse to bow to the gods of the culture.

They don't affiliate themselves with a political party. they're not a part of a religious system.

They don't pledge allegiance ultimately to family or a sports team or Wall Street because their allegiance is to one and only Jesus.

Jesus. And when you do not bow to the gods of the culture, there will be a rub in any culture, in any society, because the gospel is a personal threat.

It's why Paul says you will be a fragrance of Christ to some and a fragrance of death to others. And it's not just because it's a personal threat.

[27 : 27] It's also a spiritual threat. Look at verse 10. Look at verse 10. This is so important. 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 for ten days and you will have tribulation.

Now, don't take that literally. Jesus is not saying, hey, the devil is going to show up in person and he will escort you to prison and then he will lock the door. No, no, no. That's not what he's saying.

What's he saying?

What's the clear understanding of the text? Here it is. Are you ready? Behind every bit of persecution you face is a spiritual war. Behind every bit of persecution you face is a spiritual war.

Why? Because I don't know if you know this, but Satan actually hates the gospel. Which means, why? Because the gospel is the power to transform a life for Jesus.

Amen? It's the power of God, Paul says, which means if we are a church that actually cares about the gospel and proclaims the gospel, we have an enemy that hates us and sees us as a threat.

[28 : 38] That is why in any culture, in any society, be it American, Roman, or fill in the blank, there will be persecution.

So here's my summary now. You ready? The only way you will never face persecution for Jesus at some level is if there isn't enough Jesus in your life to persecute.

the only way you will never face persecution for Jesus at some level is if there's not enough Jesus in your life to persecute.

Or let me put it this way, every Christian will not die a martyr's death, but every Christian is to live a martyr's life. that's Christianity.

That's what we are called to be. He makes a declaration of victory. Why? Because sometimes you feel like you're losing because persecution is a natural part of following Christ.

[29 : 51] Now you might say, oh, I wish I wouldn't have come to church today. I hope you won't say that. But what you might say is, pastor, I'm afraid. I'm going to be honest with you, I'm afraid.

Because they might fire me. And they might not be my friend anymore. And they might call us intolerant.

That's exactly how the church at Smyrna felt. Because look what Jesus says, verse 10. Do not fear. What you are about to suffer, that's the negative. Here's the positive. Look at the last part of verse 10. Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life.

Jesus says, here's how I want you to live. Okay? I know you feel like you're losing. I know you're being outed. I know they're calling you a lot of things. I know they don't understand what it is that you believe.

[31 : 03] But I do not want you to have fear. What I want you to do is live by faith. I want you to be faithful. And you would say, how? How? I'm going to give you three quick things as to how it doesn't get any more practical than this, faith family.

How do we live by faith? Do you all want to be faithful to the end? As a church, you better say yes. I'll come out there and kick you. I'll walk to Lakeville and kick you.

Anyways, I want us to be a church that would say, yes, we want to be faithful to the end. We want to be faithful to the end. So how do we do it? Because there's going to be times it'll be easy to be afraid.

Here are the three things right out of the text. Number one is this. We must have a firm grip on what is valuable. We have got to have a firm grip on what is valuable.

Did you notice the parenthetical back in verse 9 when Jesus says, I know your poverty, and then the parenthetical statement, but you are rich. In other words, you're not rich economically, you're not rich financially, but you're rich spiritually.

[32 : 06] You're rich in the things of God. And then you go on to verse 10 and he says, be faithful unto death, and you will receive the what? The crown of life.

Now there's another play on words there quickly. In Smyrna was a golden street that ran right through the middle of the city. And a temple to Sibylle was on one end, and a temple to Zeus was on the other, and right in the middle was this big mountain.

And I wish I had a better picture, but this is the best I got. This mountain, and on top of it was these buildings. Do you notice how that looks like a crown? This was true historically.

In fact, it was called the crown of Smyrna. In other words, these Christians knew exactly what Jesus was saying.

They would have interpreted it to mean this. Even though you are poor, you are rich in God, for you will receive the crown of life, and the crown of life is far greater than the crown of Smyrna.

[33 : 09] Smyrna. You have something that's not of this world. You are rich in God. It is why a few weeks ago, I know you remember that sermon, just say yes.

I told you that worry is a treasure issue. Don't be anxious, but seek first the kingdom of God. Why? Because the kingdom of God don't rust.

God isn't destroyed by moth. He doesn't fade away. That's where our treasure must be.

Or we will be scared to death. You don't have to fear when you know what's truly valuable in life, and it's not found in this world.

Amen? But not just that. Here's the second thing. If we're going to be faithful, even in the face of fear, we need this, and this won't shock you. You knew it was coming eventually.

[34 : 18] We've got to have a firm understanding of the gospel. Now, here's what I mean by that. Let me show you where I get it from the text. Look at verse 10. It says, be faithful unto death.

Does that sound familiar to anybody? It should if you're familiar with Philippians chapter 2. Paul writes in Philippians chapter 2 and verse 8 that Jesus humbled himself and was what? Obedient to the point of or obedient unto death. Oh, here's why I love, here's why the gospel is the best news in the world.

Are you ready? Are you listening? When Jesus says, I know you're suffering, he doesn't mean that intellectually. He means it personally.

He knows exactly what it's like to be misunderstood. He knows what it's like when they drive nails through you.

[35 : 24] Because they don't get the kingdom of God. Jesus knows your suffering.

And when he tells us be faithful unto death, he's not telling us to do anything he hasn't already done. Meaning, and this is important, Brian, because we talk all the time about being a church centered on the gospel.

Here's what it means. It means that the gospel is not just a message that we believe. It is the life that we live. It is the life that we live.

This is normal Christianity. You say, Pastor, that's not what I signed up for. I signed up for an easy life, a painless death, with golden streets where I can eat bonbons and listen to harp music for eternity.

To which I would say, you don't want to be a Christian. You just want a vacation. And a really long one. Christianity is taking up a cross.

[36 : 38] That's the gospel. Here's the third way we can be faithful in the face of fear. Y'all can get fired up on this one if you want to. Is have a firm faith in the future.

Look at verse 11. 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 second death, plain and simple, is eternal separation from God in the book of Revelation.

That's ultimately what it is. Eternal separation from God. Can I give you some good news, Christian?

That ain't our future. That's not our future. Our future is not judgment.

Our future, because Jesus is the first and last, the one who died and rose again, our future is not judgment. It's resurrection. That's awesome. It's like the...

[37 : 36] You can clap if you want to. Okay, maybe not. It's like one old boy said he was threatened. I forget the reference. He was threatened for death because he was a Christian, to which he replied, you can't threaten me with heaven.

What kind of threat is death? I'm not going to face the second death. In other words, this is kingdom math. This is kingdom math. If you are born only once, that is physically, you will die twice.

You'll die physically, and you'll die spiritually. That is eternal separation from God. But if you've been born twice, that is physically, and then you're born again, you have new life in Jesus Christ, you're only going to die once.

And that's physical. You will not be separated from God because you have eternal life with God forever and ever in Christ Jesus. That's your future.

That's your future. It's what I told you a few weeks ago. Christian, this life is as close to hell as you will ever get. You won't face the second death, so don't fear.

[39 : 00] I've already declared victory. I'm alive. You will be too. Death doesn't have the final word. Come on. Like, move this from our theology into our life where we aren't so comfortable, but we're bold and courageous and faithful in the face of fear.

I'll close with this. Only because they make me. True story.

86-year-old pastor receives a letter which is a warrant for his arrest. The letter says, if you don't renounce your faith, we will kill you.

The church that he pastored encourages him to hide. He feels like he should stay, but he eventually decides to hide at least temporarily, but they find him because someone gives his location away.

He's brought before the authorities. True story. This 86-year-old pastor, he's brought before the authorities, and here's what they tell him. Quote, respect your years and change your mind.

[40 : 31] The 86-year-old pastor looks at them and says, quote, for 86 years I have served him and he has done me no wrong. How can I refuse the king who saved me?

To which they replied, but we will burn you. The pastor replied, fire burns but an hour. Judgment burns for eternity.

Do not delay. Do what you will. And they did. The year?

The year? 156 A.D. The pastor? A man by the name of Polycarp who just so happened to be a disciple of John.

The church he pastored? The church of Smyrna. It was the very fulfillment of Jesus' words. It was the very fulfillment of Jesus' words.

[41 : 45] I ask you today, are you living in a jungle of fear when all you have to do is walk out into freedom? Because what Polycarp knew and the church at Smyrna knew and what we must know as well, faith family, is that there is a historical event that has happened.

And I am not talking about the atomic bomb. I am talking about the cross and the empty grave.

Hallelujah. That happened! And because that happened, we do not have to just survive.

We do not have to live in fear. And we do not have to fight for victory. Because brother, sister, we already have it.