

Revelation

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[0 : 00] Polycarp was born in the year 69, about 1900 years before me. His name means much fruit.

He occupies a very important place in the history of the Christian church, and particularly the early Christian church. He is among the earliest Christians whose writings still survive today, nearly 2,000 years later.

According to one scholar, Polycarp may have been the one who compiled and edited and published the New Testament for the first time.

He was an elder of an important congregation, which has a large contributor to the founding of the Christian church and the spreading of the Christian gospel in the very early days. His ministry was also crucial in its timing because after the apostles had died, a number of new teachings flooded into the early church, and it was Polycarp who was regarded as the most significant defender of the apostolic faith, the orthodox Christian faith in the second century.

He is, however, most famous not for his life but for his death, and his death at the hands of the Roman Empire. He initially managed to escape the authorities once he heard that they were after him.

[1 : 22] He was discovered by a child. Soldiers came and arrested him, and when they came to arrest him, he cooked a feast for them, put on a big banquet for them. They sat and scoffed the food down while he spent.

He got permission to spend an hour in prayer, but his prayer was with such fervency, and they obviously had lots to eat, and they allowed him to pray for two hours. And in the process of him praying while they were eating, and they could hear it all, the soldiers who came and arrested him were absolutely stricken by the fact that they were arresting such a godly and fervent man, someone who they held in high esteem, and in fact they repented of that, but they ended up taking him nevertheless to the Roman proconsul, kind of like a judge guy, and he was condemned to be burned at the stake.

So Polycarp, the Roman proconsul, when he was there talking to Polycarp, he encouraged him to save his life and to denounce Jesus.

And Polycarp answered with his now famous statement, The proconsul then threatened him a number of times.

He threatened to throw him to the wild beasts, but apparently those gains were over, so it was illegal for him to do that. And so the crowd insisted that Polycarp be burnt to the stake.

[2 : 57] And Polycarp says, away you go. He was threatened with the burning of the stake, and his response was, The fire you threaten me with only burns for a short time, and then it goes out.

You are ignorant of the future fire of judgment, which is never put out, and which is reserved for the ungodly. And so what are you waiting for? Do what you want to do. Polycarp was let out to be burnt at the stake, and as was the normal custom, they tied the person to the stake, but they also nailed them to the stake.

And they didn't do that for Polycarp. He said to them, Leave me as I am, for he that gives me strength to endure the fire will also enable me, without your securing me, to remain in it without moving.

So he says, I'm not going to run. I'm going to run away. And so on the 23rd of February in the year 156, the fire was lit, Polycarp died, and in dying he received the crown of life.

Now Polycarp was discipled by the Apostle John, who wrote Revelation that we're looking at right now. And it was the Apostle John who ordained Polycarp as the Bishop of Smyrna.

[4 : 19] And so in Revelation 2, verse 8, Jesus tells John to write to the angel of the church in Smyrna. And he says in verse 10, Do not be afraid of what you're about to suffer.

Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. The message of these three verses, the message of the life of people like Polycarp and many thousands who have followed him, is that Jesus is more precious than life itself.

I announced, sorry, I didn't announce, I mentioned last week when I was preaching that each of these messages to the seven churches, although written to specific situations, to specific churches, were in fact, were for all the seven churches in Asia Minor.

And also for us too. They are letters for us. Each one of these messages, the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3, are messages for us too. I also mentioned that each of them had a specific structure.

For instance, notice that they all begin by stating something about the aspect of Jesus' glory that John saw in his vision of Jesus from Revelation chapter 1.

[5 : 42] And in each case, the aspect of Jesus' glory that is mentioned at the beginning of each one of the seven churches is relevant for the content of the rest of that particular letter for that church.

So last week, Jesus is mentioned as the one who walks among the seven golden lampstands as the Lord of the church. And then a little later, he threatens to remove the lampstand from that church in Ephesus because of their lack of love.

Connection between who Jesus is and the application for the church. And so writing to the church in Smyrna, in verse 8, we see Jesus identifies himself as the first and the last who died and came to life again.

And then in verse 10, he says to this church, Do not be afraid of what you're about to suffer. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Jesus, I was dead, I'm alive now. Be faithful to death, and I'll give you the crown of life. In every case, it is the vision of Jesus, his splendor and his glory that drives the application for each one of these churches.

[6 : 58] Now there is a depth in the vision that John received here of Jesus and that gets reflected here in this church at Smyrna that really just cannot be plumbed by mere mortals like us.

He identifies himself as the first and the last who died and came to life again. And so as far back as your mind can go, and Jesus was there before all of that, he is the first.

He was the first, before all else, before anything else was, he was. He cannot be preempted. Now you need to be careful because thinking about him as the first and the last will tax your mental capacity until your brain kind of wants to explode.

Or in my case, I turn on the TV and get distracted. Jesus is bigger than our ability to understand. He is also the last. Nothing will endure beyond Jesus.

He is before and after everything. He is the master over all things, over all time and space. He stands as Lord of all of that.

[8 : 11] He is the one who died and came to life again. Now that blows your mind. How does the one who is the first and the last, who never had a beginning, never will have an end, also die? He is before and after all that is and yet he enters into the progress of history.

He was killed and rose from the dead. There are no categories in the philosophies and the religions of the world that makes this stuff fit, that makes claims like this.

The death and resurrection of Jesus ultimately means that death has now power over him. He is bigger than death.

Our last and final enemy, Jesus has conquered it. He is bigger than it. And if he is bigger than death, he is also bigger than life.

And so after Jesus announces himself in verse 8, he says in verse 9 that he knows three things about this church in Smyrna.

[9 : 15] He knows their afflictions, their poverty, and the slander that's made against them. What could be more comforting than for this Jesus, the first and the last one who's dead and alive again, to come to this church in Smyrna and say, I know.

I know it all. I know what's going on. Jesus does not trivialise their suffering by telling them, it's not really that bad after all. He doesn't demean them by telling them if they were a little bit stronger, they wouldn't be feeling it so much.

They wouldn't bother them so much. He doesn't cheapen their experience by offering them unsympathetic advice, you know, well, you know, it'll be better one day. Jesus honours their suffering with a simple and comforting words, I know.

I know. Your afflictions. One of the most discouraging impacts of suffering is the feeling of loneliness.

And Jesus here reminds this church of his presence. I'm with you. I know your afflictions. Jesus also knows their poverty.

[10 : 25] The irony is that Smyrna was known as the glory of Asia. It was an affluent city, a highly regarded city, an up-and-coming city. And the church in this city stood in stark contrast.

The church was poor. Their affliction most likely came from the people of influence in Smyrna. They opposed Christianity because they thought it was not going to appease the gods of the Roman Empire.

They thought it wasn't going to make Caesar happy. And they thought it wasn't going to do the reputation of Smyrna any good either. And so this little church in Smyrna was opposed by the power structures of the empire.

It had no financial resources, no influence in society. Or so it seemed. Jesus says to them, I know your affliction.

I know your poverty. This means that the true Lord of Lords, the King of Kings, the one whom Caesar will bow the knee to, knows them.

[11 : 40] He knows their need. And he says, despite how it looks, you're rich. It's the same paradox that the Apostle Paul expressed when he describes himself in 2 Corinthians 6 verse 10 as poor and yet making many rich, as of having nothing and yet possessing everything.

In Jesus, we are rich because we have what will save life into all eternity. the only thing that will matter is whether or not you have the gospel.

And if you have the gospel, you are rich because you have life. You possess eternal life and this wealth is yours if you trust in Jesus. Jesus also knows the slander of those who say that they are Jews but they are not, but are of the synagogue of Satan.

You see, the Roman Empire had exempted Jews from participating in the Roman Imperial cult, you know, the sort of pagan idolatry of the Roman Empire.

Jews sort of got like a free ticket, didn't have to be part of that. Everyone else was required to participate and obviously Christians would not want to participate in Roman idolatry and all their festivals and celebrations and it seems that the Jewish slander here probably has to do with the Jews dobbing in the Christians for not participating, taking them to the authorities, you know, ringing up the police and saying the guys they're not there enjoying in the festivities.

[13 : 23] Jews. And so the might of the empire is coming upon them. And what Jesus says here is that he denies the status of Jew, a person of God to those who do not serve the Jewish king Jesus himself.

He identifies their true allegiance. He said, they are those who gather in synagogues in churches to celebrate Satan's kingdom and not God's.

all who oppose King Jesus are aligned to a rebel kingdom whose Lord is a liar and a murderer who hates those who serve Jesus. You see, Satan's plan is to wreak havoc upon the people of God and Jesus says, I know, I know it.

In times of hardship and affliction for the gospel, I think frankly we need to know that he knows. He wants us to know that he knows. It's a word of comfort.

But also what Jesus does here is he brings perspective to this church at Smyrna. At first, at the beginning of verse 10, he tells them, do not be afraid what they're about to suffer.

[14 : 39] And the only thing that will keep them from fearing is what Jesus has already told them. who he is, he's announced himself as the first and the last who died and came to life again.

And he's assured them that he knows about their suffering. He knows who their enemies are. And they don't need to be afraid because of who he is, what he's done, that he knows and that he is near.

That's a bit of perspective. The second bit of perspective, he identifies who's at work in their suffering. It's the devil who will put some in prison. There is no question here about who's in the right and who's in the wrong.

The devil has a plan to perpetrate evil against God's people. He wants them to be faithless to Christ. And so the purpose statement following the announcement that Satan, the devil, is going to put some of you in prison, there's a purpose statement there that follows.

It says, to test you. I don't think that's Satan's purpose. I actually think that's God's purpose. It seems it's one of those texts in Revelation, in fact, in the Bible, that indicates that God is using Satan to accomplish his good purpose.

[15 : 59] What Satan wishes for ill, God turns around and uses for good. God is using the devil's persecution to test and to approve his people the hardship is God's polishing cloth, if you like, on his people.

And when his people come through the test, they make Jesus look magnificent. They make Jesus look more valuable than life itself.

because only God could preserve them through such a trial. There was a lady, this was written, I remember the first sermon, you might, this is taking you back a little bit, very first sermon here in Revelation.

this was written in the time of the Emperor Domitian. He was the kingpin in the Roman Empire. And one of the, one of the acts of Domitian was he persecuted a Christian family.

There was a Christian lady who had seven sons. and he had each, put each one of these family on trial and particularly persecuted the mother who was a known of the high society as a quite, a famous Christian lady.

[17 : 25] And the way he persecuted her was to line up her seven children and kill them one by one. Declaring each one of these children to give up on their faith in Jesus.

And none of them would. And he didn't just do it, denounce Jesus, no, God, denounce Jesus, God. It wasn't just a flash in a moment, it was over the course of months.

He stretched it out to try and force her to break. And so one by one in front of her, her children were killed. One thrown over a cliff, another one fed to the lions, two beaten to death with clubs, couple burned at the state.

Until finally all her kids dead, tortured for another bunch of months, she refused to give in until it was her time for execution.

and she died, committed to Christ and the Roman Empire, people in Rome, watched it all happen over the course of months.

[18 : 36] And when she died, the gospel just spread. She died with joy and made Jesus look magnificent. Her kids died with joy and made Jesus look magnificent.

and so God was glorified. What the devil perpetrates for evil, God uses for his good, for his glory.

And Jesus brings further perspective to them when he said that they will suffer persecution for ten days. It seems that ten days here points to a full but a limited amount of time.

The point is to communicate to these Christians in Smyrna that Jesus knows that they're suffering. He knows how long they're suffering for, how long it's going to last, and it is relatively short in comparison to the second death.

And it's on the basis of that perspective that Jesus brings to this church in Smyrna that we have this audacious command, be faithful, even to the point of death.

[19 : 52] Only Jesus could make that kind of command. Only Jesus has the authority necessary to place this kind of obligation upon his people. He is the master of all history.

He is the one who has laid down his life. He is the great martyr himself, the one who was dead but is alive forever. he knows what these Christians in Smyrna are facing and he says, be faithful.

Notice, this is not a letter of condolences to the church at Smyrna. Jesus isn't saying that it was infinitely sad what they were facing.

He wasn't saying, I'm so sorry for getting you into this. He didn't say, I don't know what went wrong. He's calling his church to take up their cross and be faithful to him.

He's calling to press on, to run the race and finish the course with joy because Jesus is greater than life.

[21 : 05] Only Jesus has the ability to reimburse those who would obey this command. The command to be faithful to death means that it is more important to be faithful to Jesus than it is to go on living.

Because of who he is and what he's achieved for us through his death, Jesus is worth dying for. And if he's worth dying for, then he is certainly worth living for. Only those who are gripped by

something worth more to them than life itself will be truly courageous.

encourages precisely here what Jesus calls this church in Smyrna to in this command. He is proclaiming that he is better than life itself.

It's what the psalmist said, Sam read out to us from Psalm 63, because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you. The great irony here is that Jesus promises life to those who are faithful to death.

Faithful to death, I'll give you life. It's in verse 10, be faithful even to the point that I'll give you the crown of life. The crown of life. Now the crown here is not the crown that you would put on the head of a king or a queen.

[22 : 25] This is the crown, the wreath if you like, that was put on the head of the victor of the games. It is the reward, the prize, the gift of the victor, the one who has overcome.

He says, keep running, keep going, keep enduring, keep being faithful, and I will give you, and this is the literal translation, the Stephanus of life.

That's what my name means. Stephen means crown. And these Christians, these early Christians, would have known about Stephanus, the first Christian martyr, who was crowned by Jesus with eternal life.

And Jesus is saying, it isn't just for Stephen, it is for all who are faithful, all who are faithful receive the victor's wreath. This crown imagery here is so significant for this church in Smyrna.

You see, this city in which they lived, this city of Smyrna, had gone through a very significant transformation. 700 years before this, it was destroyed, flattened. And it laid flattened for 300 years.

[23 : 43] And then it was rebuilt. And it was rebuilt quite significantly. It had been regarded as a city that had come back from the dead.

And it was the crowning jewel of the Roman Empire, a city of affluence and beauty. A very significant city. And one of the symbols for the city of Smyrna was the crown.

And Jesus offers this church in Smyrna an alternative. Deny me and pursue the crown of Smyrna. Smyrna, take your place in the society of Smyrna, or remain faithful to me and receive the crown of life.

It's quite significant for Jesus to promise his church, suffering at the hands of this city, the crown of life, the other side of death. Because death is the only way to life.

life. Jesus dies on the cross and he rises to life. Jesus dies on the cross and gives us eternal life.

And the great irony is that death is the only way to life.

[25 : 01] Death to self, death to sin. When we are dead to self and dead to sin, then we will be dead to the world and we'll be dead to fear.

But we'll also be alive to the power of the spirit through faith in Jesus. And so this letter to this church at Smyrna closes by calling those who have ears to hear what the spirit says to the churches.

And then the promise of life in verse 10 is reinstated in different language in verse 11 where it says, he who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.

death. As one of the, I think it was Saint Jerome, one of the martyrs of the Roman Empire said, you may take my life but you will not hurt me in the second death.

Overcoming here means from remaining faithful to Jesus even to death. death. And we see what the second death is in chapter 20 verse 14 where it says the lake of fire is the second death.

[26 : 13] If anyone's name is not written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. And the second death is infinitely worse than dying a first death.

And the only way to avoid it is to put your trust in Jesus, to give your life to the one who offers you life forever. And so God gets the glory for his martyrs because he is the one who has convinced them that his love is better than life.

He is the one who's worth their death to declare. He is the one who has so satisfied their hearts, so filled them with joy and contentment that they cannot deny him.

His love is greater than life. In April 2007, five young Muslim men stormed into the office of a Christian publishing company in southeastern Turkey.

They tortured and killed three young Christians because they regarded them as a threat to Islam and to their country. And these three young lives, which were taken, were the first known martyrdoms of Turkish Christians who had converted from Islam since the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923.

[27 : 43] Days later, the funeral for one of them murdered was conducted at the Anglican Church in Esmir. That was his hometown. That's where he came to Christ.

Esmir is modern-day Smyrna. And even now, God is calling his people to be faithful to him, even to death.

Many have, many still do. Many of us are aware of what's going on right now with our brothers and sisters in northern Iraq.

May their joy be complete. more Christians died because of their faith in Jesus in the 20th century than all the previous centuries combined.

Christ is still calling people to be faithful even to death. Nowhere does the New Testament promise freedom from suffering in this life.

[28 : 48] In fact, without the cross there is no crown. My friends, we're not sitting in northern Iraq, we're sitting in Chatswood and we need these verses from Revelation chapter 2.

Not just because there may be some of us sitting here now who may die because of Jesus, but because all of us live.

That's why these verses are so essential. All of us live. And because all of us live, we face the question, is Jesus more precious to me than life itself?

will I be faithful to Jesus and to carry the cross even this week?

And if we're going to do that, we need to know that Jesus knows everything we face. We need to know that Jesus has a purpose in whatever we're going through.

[29 : 52] We need to be full of confidence in Jesus and not resting on our own resources to endure and to overcome. And we need to think constantly on what Jesus has promised to those who overcome that victory wreath, that crown of life that will never fade.

Jesus is bigger than life itself. can you say with the apostle Paul to live is Christ, to die is gain? Can you say with the psalmist because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you, my lips will praise you and honour you and love you and esteem you.

when Polycarp was tied to the stake for his execution, he prayed this prayer.

It is a prayer that expresses that Jesus is more precious than life for him and far from being a tragedy, it was his joy. Let's pray.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Now, Lord God Almighty, the Father of your beloved and blessed Son, Jesus Christ, I give you thanks that you have counted me worthy of this day and this hour, that I should be part in the number, have a part in the number of your martyrs, among whom may I be accepted this day.

[31 : 26] I praise you for all things, I bless you, I glorify you, along with the everlasting and heavenly Jesus Christ, your beloved Son, with whom to you and the Holy Spirit be glory both now and to all coming ages.

Amen. Amen.