

Jesus speaks to His Church - Do not be afraid!

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[0 : 00] Revelation chapter 2, verses 8 to 11. Got some feedback somewhere. To the angel of the church 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 the slander of those who say 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.

Be faithful even to the point of 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.

He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death. Amen. The Lord will bless the reading of his word. Fear is a funny thing, isn't it?

[1 : 11] When I was a young boy, I was thinking about this just before I stood up. I was afraid to go to school when I was a little boy because I had little round glasses.

Look at my glasses. It took a lot to overcome this fear. Apparently now round glasses are trendy. But when I was a little boy, they were not trendy because they told everybody that you got them on the NHS.

Yeah? So that also told them about your poverty. Fears are funny. The kind of things we fear. Some of you may be afraid of spiders.

Or tortoises. Or mice. Just heard mice. And actually, the thing about fear is that some fears are kind of ridiculous too.

Like being afraid of a little spider. You're much bigger than a spider. You know, if you want to do, you could put your big foot on it and crush it. Terrible thing to do because God made them and they're little twiddly, lovely twiddly little things.

[2 : 24] But nonetheless, you might have done that. You're much bigger. And yet, for some of you, you might find yourself on a chair when a spider walks across the room and kind of... But it's there, isn't it?

But fear is complex as well. It's right to be afraid of things. Like if a lion walked through your room, you'd be afraid, wouldn't you? Yeah. When I was in Zambia, in the western province of Zambia, in Luamba, on a mission station, every Friday night, they had the equivalent of like their disco.

You know, and it was loud and raucous and they made alcoholic beverage out of maize and shima, which we drank every day. But if it fermented, it got you drunk.

And then one particular Friday, the drum sound stopped beating and the sound came up, Duma, Duma.

Duma meant lion. And then men were running around with flaming torches. Now, you can't really say, well, you're rather silly to be afraid.

[3 : 30] Duma could eat you. So some fears are good. Not all fear is bad. And we must remember that when we hear Jesus' words, do not be afraid.

He's not denying the reality and indeed the goodness of fear sometimes. It is important. But there are times when we are not to be afraid.

Fear is a natural and a biological condition that we all experience. And it is important that we experience fear because it keeps us safe. But then there are some fears that don't keep us safe. They make us unsafe. Some of the fears and anxieties that we have those fears of things that are never going to happen.

And we kind of know they're not going to happen, but we're afraid anyway. These are the kind of fears that keep us tied down and in a kind of slavery.

[4 : 39] And Jesus says to us, do not be afraid. When we feel afraid, then we will move into different types of action.

You've heard of fight and fright and flight. But apparently there are four. Freeze, fight, flight, or fright.

And you will have experienced them all. You know, the rabbit in the headlight moment. You just don't know what to do. You should run away, but actually you can't run. You're so afraid. The fight and flight, well, at least that's positive.

You're doing something. But then the ongoing fright that is a consequence and very often a legacy of fear. Sometimes we fear in anticipation of an event.

Like, if you don't like dentists and you've got an appointment on Wednesday. Yeah? some people don't like that. You don't like doctors, but you've got to go.

[5 : 44] Other people have conditional fears. We probably have both types. Fears from real events, conditioned upon real events.

and we just don't know what the outcome of those events are going to be. Now, the goal is not to get rid of the fear. Not even to resist the fear.

The goal here, Jesus says, is to trust me with your fear. Do not be afraid. Why? Because he is the first and the last.

He is the living one. He was dead and is alive again. Don't be afraid because, Smyrna Church, because of all that I showed you about myself in Revelation chapter 1.

That's why Revelation chapter 1 is so important before you preach through the letters to the churches. The risen and ascended Jesus is able to help you with your fears.

[6 : 49] That's why we ought not to be afraid. Okay, it's important to say that because it's very easy to say to people, don't be afraid, when they're afraid and they think, ah, yeah, but you don't know what I'm going through.

And that's absolutely right. I don't. And it may even be horrible as it was for the Smyrna Church. But Psalm 53, 56, verse 3 and 4 says, when I am afraid, I will put my trust in you.

In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust, and I'm not afraid, for what can mortal man do to me? That's a perspective.

Okay, mortal man can actually do quite a lot to you. But what he can't do is take away your soul from Jesus. He can kill the body, but Jesus says, after that, no more.

Still a big deal, killing the body. But he can't separate you ultimately from God. And having that eternal perspective is what Jesus wants us to see today.

[8 : 00] So just a quick recap on the seven churches. Each church is different. All in the region of Asia Minor, remember, which is modern-day Turkey. Yet the message to each is also a message to all.

And it's a message for all time, to all of the churches. So the lessons that one church learn, hopefully learn, and the warnings and admonitions that they get were to apply to ourselves today. In this sense, they're typical of all churches. And there will be aspects of what they go through that we will relate to, and there'll be other aspects that we will less relate to.

This church may be one because this church isn't particularly criticized for anything. it's going to undergo severe persecution, physical persecution. And thank God, as yet, we don't experience that in this country.

But if we were a church in Sudan or a church in China or a church in Pakistan, perhaps they would know what this is feeling like, and it will be really relevant to them.

[9 : 06] There is a commonality about the way that each letter is written. There's a greeting to the church. The church is named. Jesus knows his churches.

There is a commendation for the things that they'd done and they should be proud of, though Sardis and Laodicea get no commendation, sadly.

There is a condemnation, something that they haven't done well, though Smyrna and Philadelphia have both been persecuted, don't get a condemnation. Isn't that interesting?

The churches that are in situations which are less threatened by unbelievers, they're doing really well. The churches where it's a bit easier and they're a bit better off, they're not doing so well.

There's a lesson there. Complacency is our biggest enemy. It really is. And then there is a challenge, a call to repent or a call to hold on, a call to recover your first love, as Fiona reminded us last week.

[10:14] And then there's a promise to those who overcome, a promise that Christ himself will be with them, will come through for them, and that it will all be all right in the end.

He who has an ear to hear, it ends, in every case. Let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. In other words, ultimately, you can write a letter.

Ultimately, the risen Christ can speak directly to you, but he's not going to force his will on you.

Have you got an ear to hear? Are you willing to do what he says, whatever the cost?

That becomes the final challenge. Now, it's interesting that this church receives the warmest praise. A little bit about the church then.

Smyrna. Smyrna is still in existence. It's the only one of the seven cities that still exist. The rest are ruins.

[11:16] Smyrna is modern Isthmir in Turkey. Some of you have been. Anybody been to Isthmir? Okay, nobody. Oh, well, visit Turkey. Little advert for visit Turkey.

It's on the Adriatic coast. It was by then, in those days, largely inhabited by Greeks. But in its history, it increasingly got inhabited by Turks, and eventually the Turks got control.

And that's historically true. Significant, as I'll explain in a moment. Smyrna has a little word in the middle. Myrrh. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Myrrh. Myrrh. Because myrrh was one of the perfumes produced there. And you get myrrh by crushing a thorn bush. Now, that's a metaphor, a very good metaphor for a church.

Persecuted and crushed as it was, it brought forth the beautiful fragrance of Christ. Smyrna.

[12:20] It was the birthplace of Homer. Homer's Iliad, Homer's Odyssey, the great Greek poet. It was destroyed on a number of occasions through enemies, through volcanic activity, through fires, great fires.

In 1922, there was a great fire. But it died and rose again. Did you notice the language that Jesus gives here?

When he speaks about those who suffer, and then he says, okay, you'll suffer, but it will be okay.

I am he who was the first and the last, who died and came to life again, just like your city. It died on a number of occasions. It could have been the end for it, but each time it rose from the ashes, it came to life again.

It became a principal city of Rome, and it was a place that honored the Romans by having lots of temples, but they also provided one for the emperor, in which they worshipped him as Lord and Son of God.

[13:37] and because of that, and because of the Christians' refusal to do that, because they believed Jesus alone to be Lord and only God to be worshipped, the church increasingly was persecuted, and Jesus says, it's going to get worse.

Ten days, maybe literal days, but maybe a Jewish idiom for a short period of time. Ten days you will be persecuted, persecuted, some of you will be put into prison, some of you will die.

Thank you for that, Jesus. That's a letter we love to get. But don't be afraid, for I am the first and the last. I was dead, and I'm alive again.

The church in Smyrna was renowned for its faithfulness under persecution. One wonderful example of this, some of you might have heard of, is the bishop of Smyrna, a man called Polycarp.

Polycarp was brought before the Roman proconsul. Because he was a Christian, he'd been arrested, and when he was arrested, the Roman soldiers who came to arrest him were amazed because they expected him to run, and he didn't.

[15:00] And when they arrived, they expected resistance, but instead, he called for food, and said, come on, come in, I'll make you the equivalent of what a cup of tea was in those days, and a few sandwiches, and they thought, why have we come here with soldiers to arrest this man?

He is no threat. When he was told of the reasons for his arrest, he said, God's will be done, I will be burned alive.

Now, how he knew that, I don't know, because that wasn't the intended way of dying. The intended way of dying was to be killed by wild animals, or put to death by the sword, but he didn't believe that would happen, as it will become apparent.

And so he was taken to the proconsul, on the way, people who knew him and respected him, because he was an old man, and he was converted under the preaching of John the Apostle, the man who is on Patmos sharing these letters.

He was John's disciple, the nearest thing he could get to Jesus, as it were, and so everybody loved Polycarp, he had his stories to tell. The people said, be strong, Polycarp, and play the man.

[16:16] And so brought before the proconsul, the proconsul saw this very old, frail man, and said, have respect for your old age, swear by the fortune of Caesar, repent and say, down with the atheists.

Imagine that if you were a Christian in those days, you were called an atheist and an anarchist. You were a disturber of the people, you were politically dangerous, and you were a non-believer in the gods.

Well, we might get a bit of criticism on Twitter or X or whatever else, but we're seldom called atheists. I saw the other day a new word, Christofascists.

We're apparently Christofascists now. For speaking out against the assisted dying bill, that makes us Christofascists. Okay. Reproach Christ, the proconsul said, and I will set you free.

Polikov's reply is legendary. Eighty-six years have I served him, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my king who saved me?

[17:29] I have wild animals here, the proconsul said. I will throw you to them if you do not repent. Call them, Polycarp replied.

It is unthinkable for me to repent from what is good, to turn to what is evil. I will be glad, though, to be changed from evil to righteousness. If you despise the animals, said the proconsul, I will have you burned.

Polycarp said, you threaten me with fire which burns for an hour and is then extinguished, but you know nothing of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment reserved for the ungodly. Why are you waiting? Bring on whatever you want. They prepared him for the stake. They went to fix him with nails to wood and he said, leave me as I am, for he that gives me strength to endure the fire will enable me not to struggle without the help of your nails.

And so he died, a martyr's death. And through his death, many more became Christians. Twelve more of the church were executed and the church underwent severe persecution.

[18:49] persecution. And Jesus said, it's going to happen. I'm not going to deliver you from this. It's not going to be easy.

But in the divine purposes it is necessary. And we will never understand, will we, why God allows us in the story of our lives to experience different times of suffering, different times of pain, different times of difficulty.

We will never understand how these can work out for our good. But we have to trust him when he says, all things work together for the good of those who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose.

even the death of Polycarp, even the death of the saints, even the persecution of the church, will work out for the glory of God.

Do not be afraid. And Polycarp modeled what it looked like not to be afraid in times of extreme pressure. Now I often ask myself, what would I have done?

[20:11] And I think, I wouldn't like it. I really don't know if I could cope through it. Spare me this, Lord. But the reality is, if you'd asked Polycarp what he would have done, he probably would have said the same, until it came to the time.

And that's maybe our encouragement. We never know what we have to go through. Jesus says, yeah, okay, there will be times of great trial, but always he will provide a way of escape so that we will not lose our faith under it.

And the way of escape might even be the way of death. But he says, don't be afraid. So what can we learn from this letter to Smyrna?

Four things. First of all, do not be afraid because Jesus is with you. These are the words, he says, of him who is first and last, who died and came to life again.

He died and he came to life again. Some of you are going to die. Some of you are going to go to prison. Don't be afraid. I died and I came back to life. And you know, all of us at some point have to live out the reality of that word.

[21:28] Whether we die by persecution or die in a hospital bed, whether we die suffering over many, many months or die immediately and catastrophically humanly speaking, we have to trust the one who says, I died and I came back to life.

Because I live, you are also going to live. It's the ultimate act of faith. We are trusting Jesus to help us to come through our suffering.

And this is because the one who died and come to life again says to us, the second death shall have no power over you. Now those words, second death, are really important to grasp.

The second death is not natural death, it is spiritual death. The second death, according to Revelation, takes place in a place called Gehenna. We might colloquially know it as hell, where there is fire and brimstone and weeping and gnashing of teeth, where death and Hades are finally thrown as Revelation 20-22 show us.

The second death cannot be escaped. The first death can. For the first death, for those who follow Jesus, means a gateway to eternal life, to life forever.

[22 : 59] And it's really important that we know that we're going to escape the second death. death. Jesus says, the one who believes in me will never die, for he is the resurrection and the life.

The one who believes in me, that's the condition. If you believe in Jesus, you will escape the second death. It's really important to ask yourself, am I believing in Jesus?

Do I have faith in his precious blood? Do I have faith in his rise into eternal life? Is all of my hope upon him for life and for eternity?

If so, you will escape the second death. And we'll be all right, we don't need to be afraid because he says to us, the work which I began in you, I will carry it on to the day of completion in Christ Jesus. He is the first and the last. Don't be afraid, for Jesus is with you. Secondly, do not be afraid because Jesus knows what you are going through.

[24 : 10] I know your afflictions and your poverty, yet you are rich. I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

The letter presents us with a very interesting contrast with the Laodicean church. Smyrnaan Christians were generally speaking extremely poor, materially but spiritually rich.

Sorry, generally extremely poor, but materially rich, not spiritually, materially rich. Sorry, let me get this right. I've got it all confused.

Exactly, Bradley. The Smyrnaan Christians were generally speaking extremely poor, but materially and spiritually rich. I got it right the first time. Whereas the Laodicean Christians were materially rich yet spiritually poor.

And that's a very interesting contrast, isn't it? The Laodiceans thought they were spiritually rich, and that's always a danger. I mentioned that last time.

[25 : 17] Big church, big congregation, lots of money in the bank, doesn't always equate to spiritual riches. The small struggling congregations can often be far more faithful and can suffer.

So don't be misled. But Jesus ultimately is the judge because he walks them on the candlesticks and he knows the true spirituality of each church.

Now the reason these Smyrnaan Christians were poor was probably because they were disadvantaged and discriminated against Smyrnaan society. We know this because the Jewish population, they were a very large population at the time, right up until 1922.

In fact, there was a large Jewish population there. The Jewish population took against them and they persecuted them. And as a result, Jesus has some very strong words about them.

Yes, they go to synagogue to worship, he says, but in what is a horrifying condemnation, he says, they are a synagogue of Satan.

[26 : 28] Not because they worshipped Satan or did anything weird with symbols and fires and that sort of stuff, but because they were doing the work of Satan in persecuting God's people.

And they don't know they're doing that. Remember Paul when he was converted, when he was Saul? Saul, Saul, Jesus said, why are you persecuting me? Saul said, who are you, Lord?

No idea I was persecuting you. I thought I was persecuting these Christians. I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. And then scales fell off his eyes. He realized that he was persecuting God's people.

He was doing unintentionally the work of Satan. So very easy for us to do that when we are not seeking the will of God. God.

And so Jesus condemned them. But the Smyrnans suffered as a result of the discrimination that they experienced.

[27 : 29] People didn't get jobs because of their faith. If they announced their faith, then they were victimized in some way. Thrown into prison.

Their lands confiscated. All kinds of things. And that is the real lot of persecuted Christians around the world. Persecuted Christians in countries like Pakistan and India and China and other places, where to be a Christian, to nail your colors to the mast, really does mean that you will suffer economically, you will suffer in terms of your status, you will suffer in terms of what you can do in that society, what you can't do, you will be discriminated against you, and the law will be against you.

People will be able to make complaints about you and accuse you of all kinds of things. They might burn down your house. They might come into the streets and whip up a crowd against you. They might threaten your lives. That happens.

And no one's going to protect you apart from Jesus. We have, thank God, some brethren in our church from Pakistan.

They have frequently in that country and do experience that. We need to pray for Pakistan. And there are these watchers on their lists of persecuted countries around the world.

[29 : 02] We need to pray for them. Because they suffer like Smyrna suffers sometimes every day. And Jesus says to them, don't be afraid.

And we say, please don't be afraid. Because we can't say that very easily. Trust Jesus in the midst of your persecution. Remember that he is with you.

He knows what you're going through. And he will comfort you. And because they were willing to trust Jesus, they were rich in faith.

He wasn't taking away their suffering. But he was with them. And their faith was shining through. And that's the amazing things. If ever you talk to people who've been through persecution and suffering, you meet some of these saints, and it's just amazing to see their faith in the face of their difficulties.

Thank God for the evidence of Jesus with them. Thirdly, do not be afraid because Jesus knows your future. Do not be afraid because Jesus knows your future.

[30 : 07] 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 10 days. Be faithful even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Don't be afraid for your future, but you might die. Only a Christian understands that. Because death is not the end.

Don't be afraid for your future, but you might end up in prison. He's not promising us an easy life. He's promising us that he will be with us if we are faithful.

Be faithful to the point of death. It doesn't mean be faithful up to the time you die. It means have an attitude of mind that says, I am willing to die for Jesus.

Be willing even to do that. Be faithful to the point of death. And all the while, keep your eye upon the crown of life.

[31 : 19] Remember your reward. You will find it is worth it all when you see Jesus. Jim Elliot once said, he is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.

A lovely, powerful thing to say. The sort of thing that gets a big amen in church. He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose. But you know, he had to live that.

When he went with those other four missionaries to work among the Auka Indians, I discovered this week that Auka simply means naked savages. And the reason it means naked savages is because before they went there, they flew over it many times.

Lots of people did. And they saw these savages, nearly naked savages. But nobody would approach them because they were so dangerous. They were reckoned to be the world's most dangerous tribe.

They had a 60% homicide rate in the tribe. That means they killed each other. 60% of the time. They had no real moral rules, but they had a rule.

[32 : 27] The rule was this. If somebody attacked you, if somebody insulted you rather, try to ignore them. If you can't ignore it, kill them.

Don't just kill the person who insulted you. Kill their family because they lived in long tribal huts. Because once you killed the person who insulted you, if you didn't kill their family, their family would come and kill you.

So if you were going to kill them, wipe them out. That was their rules. That was why they never grew much as a tribe because they kept killing each other. 60%.

When the missionaries went there, they enticed them with gifts. But eventually what happened was, when they came down, there was a plot to kill them.

And when they landed on the sandbank near the Karari River, when they landed there and they started to build their hut, they radioed back home and said to the wise, we think they're going to come for the first meeting.

[33 : 34] And they did approach. But hidden in the jungle were others, warriors who were going to kill them. And they speared them. They killed them all.

And they threw their bodies into the river. And those men didn't come home. And it looked like the work that they had gone to do for Jesus would be lost.

Who else would go after such terrible deaths? But here's where a wonderful grace of God happened. The pilot was called Nate Smith.

His sister Rachel and Elizabeth Elliot went back there very soon after. The missionaries died in 1956.

Rachel and Nate went back in 1958 to the tribe. Who weren't called Aukas. They were called Waudanis. Waudani means unique people.

[34 : 40] That's how they saw themselves. Unique people. So they went back to work among the Waudanis. Among the people that killed husband and brother.

And wonderfully one of the men who murdered Rachel's brother was converted. A man called Minkai. He was converted.

He wasn't the first. The first to be converted was Dewey, the wife of Kimo. Kimo and Dewey also had murdered the men.

She baptized them in the river that they threw their bodies into. It gets even better.

Rachel stayed there for 36 years as a missionary. She adopted one of the Waudanis as a sister. She stayed there for all of that time.

[35 : 45] And so Nate Smith's son Steve started to come for his holidays when he was 10. And when he was 10 he was baptized by Kimo in the river by the man who murdered his dad.

When Kimo baptized him Kimo said seasons and seasons ago we came here to do a bad thing our creator that made your heart cry.

But now look we have come back to this same sand place to make your heart happy. When Rachel died Steve replaced her in the tribe.

Very successful businessman. They appealed to him to come and live among them and he did. To help them not only to receive aid but to give aid to others and to give them the tools to share the gospel with other tribes in their country of Ecuador.

25% of the tribe of the Waudani were converted to Christ. Minkai who had murdered his father was adopted by Steve as his grandfather.

[37 : 14] Grandfather Minkai they called him. And when Steve went to America Minkai would go with him couldn't speak a word of English but he could interpret. At Saddleback Community Church Rick Warren's Church in 2006 Steve introduced Minkai as the man who killed my father.

But he isn't really that man he says. He is a coming after one. He has found God's trail and he follows it. And even more amazing when Steve lost his own daughter tragically who was preparing to be a missionary and she died suddenly of a brain hemorrhage.

Minkai was in the hospital saying don't be sad. She has gone to Anari to heaven. She has gone to the father's hut.

You will go to be with her. And then he went around the hospital wards speaking to them in Kecha trying to share the gospel.

Are they ready to go and walk God's trail? Steve, in a film presentation of this story, said, God doesn't write his whole story in one chapter.

[38 : 38] There are some chapters in the book that can be very, very painful. Why is it that we insist that every chapter has to be good when God promises only in that last chapter that he will make all the other chapters make sense?

If my dad and Roger, Pete and Ed and Jim hadn't died, then the Waudani would not have become my family and they wouldn't be walking God's trail too.

And now as Gekita, the man who led the raid and first speared my dad, said, now I am an old man, Babi. Being an old man, I'm going to die and go to Oneri and your father and I are the one, your father and I, the one whom I speared, we're going to live happily together, but you stay here and

you teach the young people so that they will want to live well and then one day they will also come to Oneri and we will all live happily together forever and ever and ever.

Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life. I don't know why you have to have some chapters in your book that are so painful.

I don't know why it has to hurt so much. I don't know why. But I do know that if I keep my eyes on Jesus, it will all work out alright.

[40 : 06] He writes the last chapter. And that's the fourth thing. Don't be afraid. Instead, listen with attentive and determined faith to what the Spirit says to the churches.

Are you prepared to let Jesus write your last chapter? Are you prepared to let him rule your life, govern your life?

Are you prepared to walk with him on life's trail? Sometimes it hurts. But just imagine being in the church of Smyrna when you heard this letter being read.

Some of you are going to go to prison. Some of you are going to die. Thank you, Jesus, for that warning. I'm off. That was your option. I'm out of here.

This is too much. Or you can say, Jesus, I'll never be able to walk this trail without you. I'll never be able to survive this without you.

[41 : 13] But I'm going to keep my eyes on you. I'm going to trust you. And I know it will be well because you write the last chapter. Let us pray.