

The Church at Smyrna: Suffering * Revelation 2
January 14, 2024 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

Every so often in my personal devotional time, I'll start out by reading from this little devotional that I have. It's called 'Awakening Faith: Devotions from the Early Church.' I'm a sucker for church history so I love to listen to and learn from people who followed Jesus a long time ago.

And there's one reading from St. Augustine that's always stuck with me. Around 400 AD, he wrote:

"What sort of pastors are they who, for fear of offending their congregants, not only fail to prepare their sheep for [trials], but even promise them worldly happiness? God himself made no such promise to this world. On the contrary, God foretold hardship upon hardship in this world... And you expect the Christian to be exempt from these troubles? Precisely because of being a Christian, he or she is destined to suffer more in this world."ⁱ

I wish that wasn't true and I wish I could tell you that following Jesus is all sunshine and roses, but the reality is that for us as believers, suffering and persecution on account of Christ should not surprise us.

2 Timothy 3:12, Paul writes: "Indeed, all who desire to live godly lives in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."ⁱⁱ

And John 15:20, Jesus Himself says "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also" (John 15:20 NIV).

So if I'm going to faithfully do my job, I need to help you to prepare for the time when we do suffer on account of Christ.

And the passage that we're going to look at today, the letter we're going to look at today, is really helpful in that respect. Turn with me to Revelation 2:8-11, the letter that Jesus sends to the church at Smyrna and we're going to think together about how to stand firm in the faith in the face of suffering.

8 "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.

9 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.

10 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.

11 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 (Rev 2:8-11 NIV).

This is Jesus' letter to the church at Smyrna and His revelation to the Church as a whole.

Now before we get into the letter itself, let me tell you a little about the city where the church lived. I'll put on my ancient travel agent hat and say '*Visit beautiful Smyrna, located at an easy thirty-five miles north of Ephesus. Book your trip today!*'

I'm not going to keep *that* up. But I *will* say that Smyrna was quite the destination. They claimed to be home to the poet Homer. Do you know Homer? He wrote the *Illiad* and the *Odyssey*? Archaeologists have found a plaque in Smyrna saying 'Homer lived here.'ⁱⁱⁱ

Next to Ephesus, it was the biggest, most important city in all of what is now Turkey and it was actually known for being a place of great beauty. Their coins actually said 'Smyrna, first in Asia, in beauty and size.'^{iv} That's a little local propaganda for you because Ephesus was bigger, but Smyrna was more beautiful. Apparently it had really gorgeous architecture and people said that their city skyline looked like a crown. In fact, one of their city symbols was a crown and archaeologists have found inscriptions of crowns all around what was Smyrna (modern-day Izmir) today.^v

Now based on that, Smyrna sounds like it was a pretty nice place to live. It was wealthy, it was beautiful. But it was also apparently a pretty difficult place to be a Christian. Like I said last week, the Church at this point in history was being hit by a pretty significant wave of Roman persecution. That's why John is writing this letter in exile on Patmos.

And the Jewish community at the time wasn't being much help. Historically the Jewish people were exempt from many of the emperor worship religious things that people had to do and for a while, Rome treated Christians like a subset of Judaism. But by the late 90s AD, many of the Jewish communities were saying 'nope – they're not with us' which pushed the Christians out from under their protective blanket.

And so Rome was against them, some of the Jewish people were against them and it was a hard time to follow Jesus. And we're not talking 'dirty looks because you're a Christian' here; we're talking 'lose your job, lose your property, lose your life' stuff. And yet...

The Christians at Smyrna kept following Jesus. And Jesus knew it. And in the letter that we just read, He applauds them for it. Did you notice that? A lot of the letters are a mix of 'well done' and 'pull up your socks' – Smyrna it's all 'well done.' 'You're faithfully following Jesus no matter the cost. Don't be afraid. Keep it up.'

And as He is encouraging the Christians at Smyrna in their steadfastness in this letter, I think that He shows us how to be steadfast in the face of opposition too. I think that He actually shows us four perspectives that will help us to stand firm in the face of suffering, so let's walk through the passage and I'll point them out.

8 "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.

This is a pretty succinct description of who Jesus is: the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. And if you remember, these descriptions of Jesus are taken straight from the vision of Jesus that John had back in chapter one. This ties it all together, confirming that that magnificent Jesus is the one who is talking to His Church. But I think that there's actually another reason why Jesus is described this way for the church in Smyrna.

For one, it's clear from this letter that some of the Christians in Smyrna were facing death for following Jesus. So how does Jesus describe Himself here? 'The one who died and came to life again.' Just in the way He introduces Himself, Jesus says 'I know that you face death; I know that your life is on the line. But I want you to know that I've died and risen again and you will too when you walk with Me.'

And do you remember what Smyrna's city slogan was? "First in Asia in beauty and size?"

Jesus here says – 'Oh yeah? I'm First and Last. I'm the Alpha and the Omega.' Before Smyrna ever existed, before the persecutors were born, Jesus was there. And long after the persecutors are dead and turned to dust and Smyrna's ceased to exist, Jesus will be there too. Jesus has the final word.

And embracing that perspective is the first way that Jesus equips us to stand firm in the face of suffering. Jesus has the final word.

Just imagine that we're the church at Smyrna. We're meeting in one of our houses, in secret, we don't have a building. We're pooling our food to make sure that everyone has enough. Any minute we know that Roman soldiers might bust through the door and arrest us for treason and yet we stand firm, we stay committed, because we know that Jesus has the final word.

Whatever the Romans do to us, there's still another move left. They might knock us down; they might knock us out. But whatever they do, Jesus gets to go last. And He has already conquered death.

Knowing that Jesus has the final word enables us to stand firm in the face of persecution because it tells us that whatever the persecution is, Jesus will overcome it. We can stand firm in the face of persecution because Jesus has the final word.

Let's keep going – verse 9 -

9 I know your afflictions and your poverty--yet you are rich!

To the outside observer, the Christians at Smyrna were dirt poor. There's probably a number of reasons for that – a lot of Christians came from the lower class generally, but on top of that,

mob violence and job loss were realities for Christians and the early Christians were so generous that they would often make themselves poor to bless others. Which meant that to the 'rich and famous' in Smyrna and probably to some of the Christians themselves, they were down and out poor.

But what does Jesus say? I know your poverty and yet you are rich!

Jesus doesn't expand on that, but what does He mean? You may be materially poor but you are spiritually rich. You may have nothing in your wallet but everything in Heaven. You are more spiritually rich than you can ever imagine!

And this is another way that Jesus prepares us to be steadfast in the face of suffering – to know that there's more to life than stuff/our belongings.

I know that we live in a society that equates success with belongings – what do they say? The one with the most toys wins? But I've never seen a U-Haul behind a hearse. There's more to life than our belongings.

And the Christians of Smyrna had embraced that whole heartedly. They held their belongings loosely. They sold them off to help others when need. They were ready to have persecutors take them away. ~~They're storing up treasures in Heaven that can never be lost (Matthew 6:19-21).~~

Hebrews 10:34 actually refers to this happening in real churches. It says "34 You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions." They knew that treasure in Heaven was better than treasure on earth (Matthew 6:19-21). They knew that there's more to life than stuff.

I think that that can help us as we look to be steadfast in the face of persecution. I think that if I'm really being honest with myself, I'm a little too attached to my stuff and the fear of losing my stuff or not having enough might make me reluctant to take risks for Jesus. Realizing that there's more to life than my belonging though helps me to set my heart on things above (as Colossians 3:1 says) and prioritize my Saviour over my stuff.

When we remember that all that we have is a stewardship from God, it can help us to hold our things loosely because there's more to life than stuff. Jesus has the last word. There's more to life than stuff.

Let's keep going – verse 9 again –

~~9 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.

Now listen, we could talk for an hour about what Jesus means by ‘Jew’ here,^{vi} but it all boils down to this: the ethnically Jewish people in Smyrna thought they were doing God a favour by persecuting these ‘Jesus followers.’ They thought they were being faithful godly people by kicking the Christians out of their synagogues and slandering them and outing them to the Romans so that they would wipe out this misfit faith.

Jesus though says to the church in Smyrna ‘These people who call themselves Jews are not being the faithful people of God that they claim to be. In fact, if they’re persecuting you, my people, then by definition, they belong to the Adversary. To Satan. Their synagogues are not synagogues of YHWH but synagogues of Satan. They may slander you and disparage you; they may insult you and accuse you. But I know who they are, and they’re not going to get away with it.’

This is a third way that Jesus prepares us to stand firm in the face of suffering – by trusting that Jesus knows the oppressors and they’ll get theirs.

You know, it’s one thing to suffer at the hands of another person and have to deal with the knowledge that they’ll get away with it. I told you in the summertime about getting my sideview mirror smashed off by somebody driving at night on the wrong way of the highway. I have no idea who that was. I had to bear the cost of their foolishness myself. I had to deal with it knowing they would never face justice. But if I know that the authorities know who they are and that they’ll have to account for what they’ve done, it makes dealing with that opposition easier. Knowing that our persecutors will get theirs gives us strength to bear up under persecution.

There’s a description of this over in another apocalyptic kind of passage – 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10:

6 God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you 7 and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. 8 He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 9 They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power 10 on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed (2Th 1:6-10 NIV).

Jesus knows who opposes His Church and they’ll get theirs. When we embrace that perspective, we are strengthened in our ability to stand firm in the face of persecution.

So, Jesus has the final word; there’s more to life than stuff; Jesus knows the oppressors and they’ll get theirs and finally – verse 10.

10 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.

We don't know if it means literally ten days or just a significant amount of time; the point is that this is not a question of 'if' the church will suffer persecution, it's 'when.' It's coming.

And Jesus says probably the most important thing in this entire passage – 'Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.'

This I think is the final perspective that Jesus gives us to enable us to stand firm in the face of persecution. He reminds us that not even death can end your life. Not even death can end your life.

That's why He says here: 'Don't be afraid. Instead, be faithful, even if it costs your life.' Normally I would say – 'uh are you crazy? I don't want to die!' But He knows that He can say this because He's already conquered death. Remember from the beginning? Who is Jesus? The First and Last! The One who died and came to life again! He has conquered death and so not even death can end your life!

Even if you die being faithful, God will raise you to life again. He's already done it once – Jesus died and came to life again. If you die being faithful to Him, you will live too.

And I love how Jesus puts it here. Stand firm in the face of persecution, even if it costs you everything and I will give you what? The crown of life.

Do you remember what Smyrna's city skyline looked like? A crown. Do you remember what their municipal symbol was? A crown. A crown that can wither and fade. A crown that can be stolen or burned in a fire.

Jesus is very subtly saying – 'sure, you can side with the oppressors and have a crown for a little while.' Or you can remain faithful to Me and I will give you the crown of life.'

Verse 11 - 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.

Frankly Jesus says, physical death is not the thing you should be most concerned about; it's the second death, the spiritual death that has eternal stakes. Stand firm now, you skip the second death and gain the crown of life. Join the persecutors and you get shut out from the presence of God for all eternity.

Be faithful in the face of persecution and receive from Jesus the crown of life.

That's your big idea for today – be faithful in the face of persecution and receive the crown of life.

How? Well remember, Jesus has the final word. Whatever they do, He can reverse. He can repay. He can restore. There's more to life than belongings and they can't take your spiritual riches. Jesus knows His oppressors and they'll get theirs. And not even death can end your life because faithfulness leads to the crown of life.

Those perspectives help us to persevere in the face of persecution and receive from Jesus the crown of life.

Now let's talk about this because we're living in a world that's very different from the one the church in Smyrna did. We don't face state-sanctioned persecution. There's no bounty on our heads as believers. We can freely exercise our faith and identify as Christians and we are very fortunate in that.

I sometimes wonder though if we don't face persecution because we're not being different enough from the culture around us. We just kind of fit in without challenging the status quo on behalf of the Kingdom. John Stott writes in his commentary on these letters "I am just saying that if we compromised less, we would undoubtedly suffer more. Smyrna was a suffering church because it was an uncompromising church."^{vii}

But that being said, I don't think that we should be out there seeking persecution and provoking people for the sake of conflict. If we steadfastly present the truths of God though, of sin and rebellion and faithfulness to the Kingdom over the world, and if we act openly as Christians, persecution will come.

And I know that some of you are going through it right now. You're facing opposition because you refuse to compromise your Christian faith. You want to lash out in a worldly way but you're doing your best to be a light shining in the darkness. You're doing your best to be a faithful believer in a difficult situation. To you I would say, keep at it. Remember these perspectives and let them fuel your faithfulness.

And if you're not facing persecution right now, stay faithful nonetheless. Pray for believers around the world, that they would remain faithful in the midst of persecution. There are people in countries all over the world who are in the same situation as the Smyrna Christians. We need to pray for them, for endurance and faithfulness and deliverance.

And tuck this message away in your hearts. As we drift further and further away from our Judeo-Christian roots as a nation, I wouldn't be surprised if we face greater persecution down the line.

Remember – Jesus has the final word. There's more to life than stuff. Jesus knows who's oppressing us and they'll get theirs. And not even death can end your life.

Be faithful in the face of persecution and receive the crown of life.

I started with some church history; it seems fitting that I end with it too. Within a century of John's (Jesus') letter to Smyrna, there was a Christian leader in Smyrna name Polycarp. He faithfully served the church for many years, until he got caught up in a major wave of persecution. He was arrested and given the chance at freedom if he would only renounce Jesus and say 'Caesar is Lord' instead.

Here's Polycarp's response from an ancient document known as 'The Martyrdom of Polycarp':

Polycarp said: "Eighty-six years I have served him, and he never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" . . .

The proconsul said: "I have wild beasts. I shall throw you to them, if you do not change your mind." But he said: "Call them. For repentance from the better to the worse is not permitted us; but it is noble to change from what is evil to what is righteous." And again [he said] to him, "I shall have you consumed with fire, if you despise the wild beasts, unless you change your mind."

But Polycarp said: "The fire you threaten burns but an hour and is quenched after a little; for you do not know the fire of the coming judgment and everlasting punishment that is laid up for the ungodly. But why do you delay? Come, do what you will." And when he had said these things and many more besides he was inspired with courage and joy, and his face was full of grace, so that not only did it not fall with dismay at the things said to him, but on the contrary, the proconsul was astonished, and sent his own herald into the midst of the arena to proclaim three times: "Polycarp has confessed himself to be a Christian..."

[In the end he was burned at the stake.]

This is the story of the blessed Polycarp, the twelfth martyr in Smyrna, though he has a unique place memory of all people, being remembered even by all the heathen. He was not merely an illustrious teacher, but also a pre-eminent martyr, whose death all desire to imitate, being altogether consistent with the Gospel of Christ. Having overcome the unjust governor with patience and acquired the crown of immortality, he now, with the apostles and all the righteous, glorifies God the Father with joy, and blesses our Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of our souls, the Ruler of our bodies, and the Shepherd of the Catholic Church throughout the world.

<https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/study/module/polycarp>

ⁱ For the Apostle says, “All who desire to live a holy life in Christ will suffer persecution” (2 Tim. 3:12). But when you, shepherd, speak your own words and not Christ’s, you disregard what the Apostle says, saying instead, “If you live a holy life in Christ, all good things on earth will be yours in abundance.” Is this the way you build up the believers? Look at what you are doing and where you are putting them! You have built them on sand. The rains will come, the river will overflow and rush in, the winds will blow, and the elements will dash against the house you have built. It will fall, and its ruin will be great (Matt 7:26 – 27).

Bell, James Stuart, ed. “Being prepared to suffer (reading 53),” *Awakening Faith: Daily Devotions from the Early Church*. Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱ See also 1 Thessalonians 3:2-4 –“2 We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God’s fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, 3 so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them. 4 In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know.

ⁱⁱⁱ source

^{iv} Danny Aiken, *Exalting Jesus in Revelation* (Christ Centred Exposition Commentary), Kindle.

^v Ben Witherington, *Revelation* (New Cambridge Bible Commentary), 101.

^{vi} Now that’s a pretty serious allegation to make but it all depends on what you mean by ‘Jew.’ When we say ‘Jew,’ generally speaking, we’re thinking of a person who has been born to Jewish parents, who is Jewish by virtue of the fact that they belong to the Jewish community. There were people in Smyrna who said they were Jews, who claimed God’s favour by virtue of the fact that they were born Jewish.

Jesus though doesn’t use that word that way here. When Jesus says ‘Jew,’ He means ‘a person who is intentionally faithful to God, regardless of their ethnicity.’ There’s precedent for that over in Romans 2:28-29. Romans 2 Paul says a person is a Jew only if they have been changed from the inside out by the Holy Spirit working on their heart.

What’s happening in Smyrna then is this: there are ethnic Jews who claim to be God’s people and there are ‘spiritual Jews’ who are actively walking with God. The ethnically Jewish say that they are Jews and they are persecuting the Christians and outing them to the Romans and slandering them as godless apostates. They think they’re doing the right thing.

Jesus though sees what they’re doing and says ‘if you’re going to oppose my people, then by definition you belong to the Adversary. That makes your places of worship not synagogues to YHWH, but synagogues to Satan.’

^{vii} John Stott, *What Jesus thinks of the Church*, 30.