

## The Eternal Life-Giving King Jesus

Revelation 2:8–11

As we move to the church at Smyrna, you'll notice some differences between Ephesus and the believers in this thriving, wealthy commercial center. There is a substantial difference between Ephesus and Smyrna. There is no 5 star review, no commendation. And no condemnation. 5 of the 7 churches are commanded to repent. Smyrna is one of the 2 churches that Jesus does not need to call to repentance. That is remarkable on its own. And that gives us some insight into the suffering they will endure. As we examined a few weeks ago, God can ordain suffering for a number of reasons, including as disciplining grace to bring his children to repentance. But in Smyrna the suffering they will endure is not associated with habitual sin. Something else is going on.

When we are suffering it is right and wise to ask God what he is doing. You may not get an answer. Job didn't. Certainly if the suffering is discipline for sin you need to know that so that you will turn from the sin to satisfaction, joy, and life in Christ.

But what if the suffering is for God's glory your eternal reward? Let's read today's passage.

**Revelation 2:8–11** — “And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

**‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.**

**<sup>9</sup> “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. <sup>10</sup> 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. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. <sup>11</sup> 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.’**

**PRAY**

**v. 8 — Jesus, the Lord of All**

We are reminded that the titles in verse **v. 8** are found in **Ch. 1:17–18**.

He is **the First and the Last, who died and came to life again**.

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Jesus is the first — He is before all things and in him all things hold together. He is the Creator of all that is created. Without him was nothing made that is made. He upholds the universe by the word of his power. He is Lord of his creation.

As he is the first, he is also the last. If he ever ceases to will the universe to be upheld, it will cease, but Jesus still is. He is not only Creator and Sustainer, he is the Judge at the end of the age. He is the last, and he will have the last word. From everlasting to everlasting, he is God. He is unchanging. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. And those who are his he will faithfully bring home, bringing to perfect completion all that he began.

This is high octane fuel for worship. This is the reality through which everything that happens in our lives is to be understood. Tribulation or comfort, poverty or riches, difficulty or ease, sickness or health — these are all means of grace that pass through the hands of Him who is first and the last.

Job insecurities, financial challenges, car crashes, family crises, mishandled medical treatment — all of these are things we facing in our own midst right now. **Get this:** Jesus is the first, the last, the Creator, Sustainer, Judge... and this very God has become our Savior. Worship him!

He died and came to life. This is the Gospel. The one who holds all things together, including your very life, holds your salvation. He died for our sins. His death was not symbolic; His death was substitutionary. He died the death he did not deserve so that I can live the life I do not deserve. The punishment that brought us peace was laid on him — that punishment is death. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world by dying, and making peace by the blood his cross.

But he is no longer dead, but came to life. He died for our sins, and he rose for our justification. In him is life, and only in him. He defeated death so that those who are placed in Christ by faith experience his eternal life.

Rather than focusing on the latest challenge, or crisis, or difficulty, look away from yourself and your own brokenness to him who is the first and the last, the sustainer, and has become your Savior.

In v. 9 we are reminded that Jesus is all-knowing. He knew their tribulation and their earthly poverty, Jesus knows. He knows your suffering, your afflictions, your challenges. He knows your faithfulness and he knows the condition of your heart.

### 3

He is not texting and distracted. He is not busy elsewhere so you'll need to call back, perhaps on Wednesday, because he is experiencing high call volumes and can't manage your problem at the moment. Here is fuel for prayer. Take your burdens to the Lord and leave them there. He knows, and he cannot act toward his child in any way but love. Why would you carry what you cannot fix when the First and the Last, who is all-knowing, is simply waiting for you to turn your needs over to him?

#### **Rich In What Matters**

The Christians in Smyrna have small bank accounts on earth, but massive investments in heaven. They are poor in the wealth that turns to dust — perhaps on account of their faith. It may be they were stripped of wealth and possessions because they would not renounce Christ. Perhaps they were just poor folks. There's a lot of those, your know. Whatever reason they were poor in the world — none of it mattered. The world is passing away. This is not all there is, and what is here is not enduring into eternity. And Church at Smyrna, you get this! Don't 2<sup>nd</sup> guess your situation. You are wealthy in grace, in spiritual blessings, in righteous works and faith that will endure forever. Laying up treasures in heaven is a good and wise idea. Moth and rust can't eat into that account. The thieving enemy cannot steal those investments. They have chosen wisely, and even though someone slander them, like these fake Jesus... none of that will diminish their investment in the Kingdom, and it won't fool God, who knows their work!

This is in contrast to the church at Laodicea who said to themselves, "I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing. But Jesus, who is all-knowing, said they were wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. Smyrna had already embraced the wisdom Jesus counseled the Laodiceans to observe: Buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see.

We do well to take account of our investment portfolio from time to time. In Matthew 6, Jesus dealt with the issues of eternal riches versus earthly wealth. To sum it up in contemporary speak, he said, ***Show me your checkbook and I'll show you what you love and where you're headed.*** Saints, let's not be found like the Laodiceans who were temporary rich and eternity poor. Whether our bank account is big or small, let's be rich in God's eyes. The first and the last will judge, and his opinion is the only one that matters.

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With all that solid rock foundation, He gives them 2 commands that are predicated on Jesus' nature and character: **Do not fear**, and **be faithful**.

### **Do not fear.**

Why would they fear? What's the source? Tribulation. Persecution is coming, Smyrna Christians.

The warning of tribulation was written in the late first century. Persecution was already being experienced, but it was going to get worse. John, the human author was in exile on Patmos, and they apparently tried to kill him, but couldn't. Within 50 years there was a wholesale slaughter on believers living in Rome in general, and some well-documented specifics about Smyrna. Christians hated because Christ was hated.

**John 15:18–19** — “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.

Why did they hate Christ? Because he called them from their sin and self-exaltation to repent and bow before him.

Again, **John** writing in **ch. 3**: <sup>19</sup> **Light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.** <sup>20</sup> **For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.**

Reflecting the character of Christ and proclaiming his Gospel ran absolutely contrary to the world. Nothing's changed, has it? If we live a counter-cultural godly life in Christ, we will be persecuted.

The cross was considered foolishness, an offense and stumbling block to Romans and Greeks, Jews, and pagans. When God poured out his wrath on Christ on the cross it exposed man's sinfulness, his inability to pay for his sin and be right with God. The resurrection shouted, “Jesus Christ is Lord!” These were antithetical to Roman religious practices. Caesar did not have a problem with Jesus as one minor god among many. Rome loved polytheism and a plethora of gods. Romans worshiped and sacrificed to all manner of deities and household gods, doing this and that work to gain some favor or merit with whatever god was helpful to them at the time. But Roman law demanded that Caesar be acknowledged as the super-god, lord over all the other gods. “Caesar is lord,” was the required acknowledgement, and it was to be accompanied by incense thrown in the fire as an act of worship.

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In the face of this rising, lethal hostility from both government and culture, Jesus tells the believers in Smyrna, “Do not fear.” If we had not spent time in vvs. 8 & 9, we might be inclined to have a cynical chuckle at such a statement. That’s easy for you to say, Jesus. But a guy I worship with had his head removed from his shoulders last week. Frankly, I’m terrified.

**But we did read vvs. 8 & 9**, so we have some spiritual weapons to fight with! When the Romans come and demand a bowing of the knee to Caesar, a pinch of incense, and a short tribute proclaimed: “Caesar is lord,” we can say, “No, Jesus is Lord. He is the first and the last. I remember when the proconsul was born, frankly, and that’s not very impressive for someone who claims to be lord.” And if they were to threaten to kill you if you didn’t curse Christ and hail Caesar, a fear-quenching, faith-stirring response might be, “If you kill the body, that’s all you’ve got. I fear him who can kill both body and soul. But let me tell you, Christ died for my sin so that I would not experience the second death. He conquered death, Hell, and the grave, and he is alive forever. I am in Christ, and you cannot separate me from his eternal life.”

Eberhard Arnold, in his book, *The Early Christians*, documents what was happening in Smyrna in the first half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century. One believer named Germanicus “strengthened the weakness of others by his steadfastness. [When jailed and sentenced for his refusal to renounce Christ,] he wrestled gallantly with wild beasts released on him by the Roman proconsul. When the tyrant tried to get him to renounce his faith and so be delivered from a brutal death, Germanicus pulled the wild beast towards himself, wishing to be freed more quickly from the godless, unjust life, and be ushered into the Lord’s presence. How was he able to do that? He had read vvs. 8 & 9. He was looking to the First and the Last, the Savior, and longing to be home. He did not fear. It is what we are to do so that faith swallows fear, and not the other way around.

Behold Him there, the risen Lamb! My perfect, spotless Righteousness,  
The great unchangeable I AM, The King of glory and of grace.  
One with Himself, I cannot die; my soul is purchased by His blood;  
My life is hid with Christ on high, with Christ, my Savior and my God.

**Do not fear, and Be faithful unto death.**

Be faithful unto death. We grow a death-defying faith by taking heed of what God has promised and instructing and bracing the soul with these eternal truths. We read verses 8 & 9, but we read the whole counsel of God word. We can be faithful unto death because we come to know our God and

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his ways. There is some faith-stirring help built into these verses. Note: There are limits God places on tribulation and suffering:

- **some of you** [will be thrown] **into prison**, not all of you.
- **that you may be tested** — The Devil may be behind tribulation, intending it for evil, God is ordaining what comes to pass for his glory and our good. God is purifying and equipping for heaven.
- We know from the book of Job that the Devil himself is limited, only allowed to do what God allows.
- **for ten days you will have tribulation** — The time of tribulation is not forever. Does 10 days define a literal 10 day period? Many of the numbers in Revelation are figurative and suggestive, so I don't think this refers to an absolute 10 days. What is important is that there is a beginning and an end, and frankly, in the grand scheme of things, 10 days doesn't sound like that long compared to eternity. Suffering is not forever. Christ is forever. Whatever suffering is experienced here will be considered light and momentary in eternity.

Be faithful unto death by feeding the soul on the life-giving, faith-nurturing truths of God's word and looking away from yourself to Christ. If we will do this, no matter whatever the world does, the Lord himself will give us a crown of life. What does that look like? I don't know but it sounds really cool. And the second death — the judgment of those outside of Christ — that will have no power at all, for we will be in Christ who is alive again forever more.

I close with this account of Polycarp, one of the very first church fathers after the apostles.

Polycarp was Bishop of Smyrna and lived to be an old man. He converted to Christ toward the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century while the Apostle John was still alive. He served loved and served Christ faithfully throughout his life, leading the church in Smyrna well. By the mid 2<sup>nd</sup> Century, persecution of Christians was common, and frequently involved their torture and murder. By the mid 2<sup>nd</sup> Century the Proconsul over Smyrna was tracking down those who would not bow to Caesar and using them as bloodsport for the entertainment of Rome. Wild beasts were commonly used as threats to get Christians to curse Christ, acknowledge Caesar as lord, and offer him incense. In Smyrna, Polycarp was captured after Gemanicus was killed. When the Roman police found him, they were impressed by his great age and his dignity and grace. He fed them a meal while he turned aside to pray for an hour. Captivated by his character and kindness, they urged him to simply say, "Caesar is lord," throw

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in a pinch of incense, and save his life. They reasoned with him that he didn't have to mean it. It was just a phrase that would meet the letter of the law. He refused. When he was taken into the arena, the proconsul tried to persuade him to deny his faith urging, "Consider your great age. Simply say that Caesar is lord. Change your mind! Say it, and I will release you."

Polycarp is recorded as saying, "Eighty and six years I have served Him, and He has never done me any harm. How then can I blaspheme my King and Savior?"

One more time the proconsul pressed him, "Swear by the genius of Caesar." After a few refusals on Polycarp's part, and threats, the Proconsul's determined to burn him alive. Polycarp said, "You threaten me with a fire that burns for a season, and after a little while is quenched; but you are ignorant of the fire of everlasting punishment that is prepared for the godless." His final statement was, "I bless you, Father, for judging me worthy of this hour, so that in the company of the martyrs I may share the cup of Christ."

Are we that different from 1<sup>st</sup> Century Rome? Well, we are different, but the gap seems to be closing. There are 2 approaches we can take moving forward, 2 different songs we can sing. The first one, not particularly helpful, would be:

*When in danger or in doubt, run in circles, scream and shout.*

I might equate that to the anthem of those captivated more by social media than God's word.

But there's a song I like better, more helpful, more bracing:

My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus blood and righteousness.

I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus name.

His oath, his covenant, his blood, support me in the whelming flood.

When all around my soul gives way, he then is all my hope and stay.

On Christ, the Solid Rock, I stand, all other ground is sinking sand.

All other ground is sinking sand.

**PRAY**

**Gospel Thread**