



Smyrna!

Alive #3 | Mar 17, 2024 | 8:00, 9:30, 11:00 AM | Preached by Steve Howell

Opening



Polycarp (156 AD) – Read from Book

“The heat was on. The Smyrna police hunted for Polycarp, the revered bishop of that city. Already they had put other Christians to death in the arena; now a mob cried for the leader.

Polycarp had left the city and was hiding out at the farm of some friends. As the soldiers moved in, he fled to another farm. Though the aged churchman felt no fear of death and had wanted to stay in the city, his friends had urged him to hide, perhaps fearing that his death would demoralize the church. If so, they were quite wrong.

When the police reached the first farm, they tortured a slave boy to learn Polycarp’s whereabouts. Then they rushed, fully armed, to apprehend the bishop. Though Polycarp had time to escape, he refused. “God’s will be done,” he resolved. Instead, he welcomed his captors as guests, offered them food and asked for an hour alone to pray. He took two hours.

Some of the captors seemed sorry to be arresting such a nice old man. On the way back to Smyrna, the police chief tried to reason with Polycarp: “What harm is there in saying, ‘Lord Caesar’ and offering incense?”

Polycarp announced calmly that he would not do it.

The Roman authorities had developed the idea that the spirit...of the emperor (Caesar) was divine. Most Romans, with their pantheon of gods, had no problem doing homage to the emperor, too; they saw it as a matter of national loyalty. But Christians knew this was idolatry.

Because the Christians refused to worship the emperor or the other gods of Rome and worshiped Christ quietly and secretly in homes, most people thought they had no faith. “Away with the atheists!” cried the people of Smyrna as they hunted down the Christians. Because they only knew that Christians didn’t

participate in the many pagan festivals or perform the usual sacrifices, the crowd attacked this unpatriotic, impious group.

So Polycarp entered an arena filled with an angry mob. The Roman proconsul seemed to respect the bishop's old age. Pilate-like, he wanted to avoid an ugly scene, if possible. If only Polycarp would perform the sacrifice, everyone could go home.

"Have respect for your age, old man," the proconsul pleaded... "Take the oath, and I shall release you. Curse Christ!"

The bishop stood firm. "Eighty-six years have I served him, and he never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my king who has saved me?" ...

The proconsul threatened to throw him to the wild beasts. "Call them," said Polycarp. "If this were a change from the bad to the good, I would consider it, but not a change from the better to the worse."

Threatened with fire, Polycarp countered, "Your fire burns for an hour and goes out, but the fire of the coming judgment is eternal."

Finally, it was announced that Polycarp would not recant. The people of Smyrna cried, "This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our gods, who teaches many not to sacrifice or to worship!"

The proconsul ordered the bishop to be burned alive. He was tied to the stake and the fire was set. But according to an eyewitness account, his body was not consumed. "He was in the middle, not as burning flesh, but as bread baking or as gold and silver refined in a furnace. And we smelled such a sweet aroma as the breath of incense or some other precious spice." When an executioner stabbed him, the blood poured out and quenched the fire."¹

This is one of the most stirring accounts of faith and martyrdom in Christian history. Polycarp stood firm in the face of death. What gave him such confidence? What gave him hope?

One word: resurrection.

Polycarp was strengthened by a belief that God could and would give him a future that would allow him to continue to imitate and follow his "King who had saved him."

Polycarp rested on God's promises...promises that should strengthen us as well.

¹ Curtis, A. K., Lang, J. S., & Petersen, R. (1998). *The 100 Most Important Events in Christian History*. Revell.

Review



In our current sermon series, we have been jumping into stories of resurrection that we see in the Bible. We are exploring the details and learning lessons about **God's character, priorities, and goals** in each resurrection story... because those ideas can **inform** and **transform** our daily lives.

- Two weeks ago, we heard the story of **Elijah and the widow's son** in 1 Kings 17. In that resurrection tale, we were reminded that **life comes from God**. Whether created or resurrected, there is no other source that we can trust for future life!
- Last week we heard the story of **Tabitha** (aka Dorcas) and learned that **resurrection is not about us!** We may benefit from it, but the focus is on God and what He is doing.



Today, we focus not on one person but on a **church** in the city where Polycarp was martyred – the city of Smyrna. In the book of Revelation, Smyrna's church was given a specific message related to resurrection. And as we listen to it, it is my prayer that we gain hope and confidence for this life, and for the next!

The Letter to Smyrna (Revelation 2:8-11)

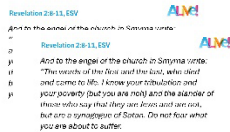
If you have your Bible with you, please turn to Revelation 2:8-11.

In case you aren't familiar with this portion of Revelation, let me give you some quick context. As the apostle John writes the book of Revelation, he is sharing messages not from himself but from Jesus. In chapter one, John records his experience with a glorified Jesus appearing to him and delivering a message not only to John but to seven churches in Asia Minor. These letters share descriptions of Jesus, as well as details related to each church's current situation. Real-world churches were getting real-world support from Christ...and we get to listen in and benefit!

Here is what Jesus says to "Smyrna Christian Church:"

And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: "The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death."
(Revelation 2:8–11, ESV)

Amen? (Amen).



This message is recorded at least sixty years prior to Polycarp and his persecution. Yet Jesus makes it clear that *even now* the church in Smyrna was facing threats and needing encouragement.

A Church Under Pressure



It was a church under *pressure*.

Smyrna's church was located in a large town on the western edge of Asia Minor (modern-day Izmir). Smyrna was an important seaport with a strong connection to the Roman Empire. It was a center of emperor worship, with a temple devoted to him. And such worship was not optional:

Under Domitian (A.D. 81–96) emperor worship became compulsory for every Roman citizen on threat of death. Once a year a citizen had to burn incense on the altar to the godhead of Caesar, after which he was issued a certificate.²

If we combine this knowledge about Smyrna with what we read in Jesus' letter, we can see the desperate situation the church in Smyrna faced:

- **It was financially poor.** *Maybe because of financial hardships for Christians who refused to worship Caesar.*
- **It was spiritually rich.** *God's blessings don't always come in the form of dollars.*
- **It faced religious attacks.** *In addition to Roman pressure, the church faced religious attacks and trouble from a Jewish minority. Their attacks served to further Satan's purposes in thwarting the church.³*
- **A spiritual test was coming.** *Imprisonment and even death lay ahead for some church members.*

The Hope of New Life



Despite that pressure, Jesus gives the church *hope*.

In each of Jesus' letters to the churches, He is **introduced** not by name but by a specific aspect of His character. For Smyrna, that depiction includes resurrection.

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

Not only is the introduction focused on resurrection, but the **ending promise** is as well.

"Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death."

² Johnson, A. F. (1981). [Revelation](#). In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Hebrews through Revelation* (Vol. 12, p. 437). Zondervan Publishing House.

³ "Synagogue of Satan" is a limited term referring to this particular instance. It is not an overall condemnation of the Jews as "satanic."

While other churches received letters focused on a new name (Pergamum) or authority (Thyatira), Smyrna's letter focuses on resurrection as a way of giving its readers hope.

These words of encouragement are brief, but they bear a lot of weight! They are especially weighty when you understand the spiritual realities being described.

Let's press pause on our look at Smyrna in Revelation 2 and do a little more digging into those spiritual realities before we return.



The Details of Resurrection (1 Corinthians 15)

To this point in our sermon series, much of our “resurrection” focus has been on people coming back to life in *this* world – rolling back death temporarily and granting more time on this earth. Yet the bulk of resurrections move into *everlasting* life.

To learn more about this everlasting resurrection, turn to 1 Corinthians 15. This passage has some of the most important teaching about resurrection that the Bible provides. It is not just information about a historical miracle; it is information about **our future** and about what happens to *this* [point to body] when we are dead, yet alive again! This is **truth** to help us get ready for the final resurrection!

Let's follow the flow of Paul's logic in this first letter to the church in Corinth:

Jesus was Resurrected

He starts by talking about the fact that Jesus was resurrected.

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.” (1 Corinthians 15:3–8, ESV)

Paul says this information is what he shared in person during his ministry...and it's what he repeats now. It is of “first importance.”

The Gospel

The phrase he uses is that **Jesus died for our sins, was buried, and was raised to life.**

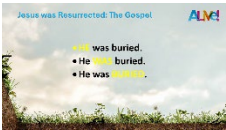
Let's take just a minute to pick apart that info (v. 3-4), using the “*word emphasis*” method of Bible study (it's an easy method you can try with any verse – just look at the Scriptural phrase and emphasis each word separately, pausing to reflect on what it contributes).





- **CHRIST** died for our sins. *The title for Jesus - the Messiah, the Anointed One. The central person in God's overall plan.*
- Christ **DIED** for our sins. *He didn't just faint; he was physically dead. Crucified.*
- Christ died **FOR** our sins. *His death was purposeful, with a reason.*
- Christ died for **OUR** sins. *This is personal. It impacts me. He is MY substitute.*
- Christ died for our **SINS**. *My numerous rebellions against a holy God.*

Skip ahead to the next part.



- **HE** was buried. *Jesus, the Christ*
- He **WAS** buried. *Past tense. (No longer)*
- He was **BURIED**. *In the grave, truly dead.*

And finally...



- **HE** was raised on the third day. *Jesus, the Christ*
- He **WAS RAISED** on the third day. *No longer dead. He is alive...as evidenced by the scores of people who witnessed Him risen.*
- He was raised on the **THIRD DAY**. *A real-world, definitive time...not a symbolic resurrection, but a historical one.*

All this was “according to the Scriptures” – it happened just like God said it would, as part of His plan to save humankind since the beginning.

This is the **gospel!** In a nutshell, this is the good news we Christians share.

“Fundamentally, the gospel is the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in fulfillment of Scripture. It is more than that, of course, but not less.”⁴

Resurrection Matters

Paul next elaborates and explains why Jesus' resurrection matters.

“What if...?” he asks. “What if resurrection was NOT true? Would it change your faith?”

Absolutely!

In 1 Corinthians 15:12-19, Paul unpacks the implications of a Jesus still in the grave:

“Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen

⁴ Andrew Wilson in *Christianity Today*, March 2024. p. 28



asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.” (1 Corinthians 15:12–19, ESV)

If there is no resurrection, then there is no hope.

But if resurrection is true...CORRECTION, *since* resurrection is true...then there are some awesome results.

1. Those of us who belong to a risen Christ will be made alive (15:23)
2. Those who oppose a risen Christ will be defeated (15:24-25)
3. Those of us who belong to a risen Christ will no longer face death (15:25-26)

Those are big results...and they matter! But it doesn't stop there. Paul also takes a minute to discuss what resurrection will mean in practical terms for us.

Resurrection is Glorification

Paul then describes our resurrection as “glorification” (that’s the theological term for it).

The reality of Jesus’ resurrection matters, and it will bring some big changes.

“I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.” (1 Corinthians 15:50–52, ESV)

Upgraded Body

First, we get an upgraded body!

If you could change one thing about your body, what would it be?

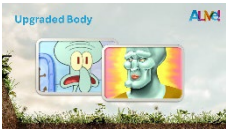
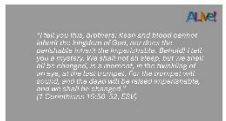
- *Maybe it would be a **practical** improvement (eyesight, hearing, teeth)*
- *Maybe it would be a **health** improvement (heart, lungs)*
- *Maybe it would be a **cosmetic** improvement (a tuck here, a lift there)*

*One change. Do you have it in your mind? On the count of three, I want you to **point** to it. Ready? 1...2...3...point.*

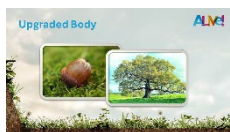
For me, I had a lot of options, but I think today it would be my nose – not the external, but the internal. I have such small airways inside that I can't breathe well through my nose. Not only does it affect my air intake, it also impacts my sense of smell. I'd love for my nose to not have a muted sense of the world.

This [point to body] is imperfect, even for those who seem to have the whole package – like _____.⁵

⁵ Choose an audience member in the service...



But the upgrade isn't just a fixing of some flaws in this body. It is more!



The biblical illustration (see verses 15:35-41) compares our upgraded body to that of a seed growing into a plant. Our current body is as different from the resurrected body as a seed is from the plant it will produce.

Just like the nature of an oak tree is hard to deduce from an acorn, we struggle to understand what a resurrected "spiritual" body might be like. But God's word provides some clues to help us.

- **Recognizable.** Jesus was recognized by his followers after the Resurrection (ex: in the garden, on the beach). People will be able to tell that you are you.
- **Tangible.** Jesus could be touched (ex: Thomas touching the healed wounds). Jesus could walk, talk, and eat. We won't just be a ghostlike spirit.
- **Special.** Jesus could do things that others couldn't (ex: appearing out of nowhere, fly/ascend). It is likely that the same physical rules that apply to our earthly body will not completely apply to our spiritual body.

Imagine a body that has not suffered degradation like ours do now. Imagine a body with perfected senses. Imagine a body without shame.

Rejoice that there is a version 2.0 ahead! Share in the emotion of Isaiah 26:19:

"But your dead will live, their bodies will rise. You who dwell in the dust, wake up and shout for joy." (Isaiah 26:19, CSB)

Upgraded Spirit

In addition to an upgraded body, our glorification will give us incorruptibility.

"For this perishable body must put on the imperishable..."
(1 Corinthians 15:53a, ESV)

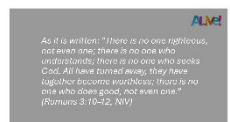
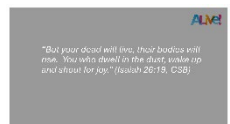
Paul uses this term "*aphtharsia*" frequently in chapter 15 (v. 42, 50, 53, 54). Some translations list it as "*incorruptible/-ibility*" and others list it as "*imperishable/-ibility*."

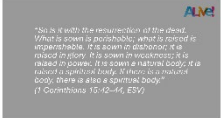
Either way there is an absence of corruption or decay in our upgraded spirit!

Your present reality is colored by sin. My flesh – my current body – is stained by sin. Its desires lean toward rebellion and evil. Its inclinations have been so thoroughly corrupted that the Bible says the following in Romans 3:10-12

As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one."
(Romans 3:10–12, NIV)

But that will change. Our new bodies will be pure and equipped for a new, holy life.





“So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.”
(1 Corinthians 15:42–44, ESV)

The new you will have an upgraded spirit.

Upgraded Lifetime



It will also have an upgraded lifetime. Our glorified, resurrected bodies will have immortality.

“For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.” (1 Corinthians 15:53, ESV)

Most people in history are a vapor in the wind – gone with no trace. Those that do leave a mark (kings, presidents, inventors) are usually no more than a footnote or a bullet point in a history book. We know little to nothing of their personality, their passion, their dreams, or their spiritual legacy; those die with the person.

Mortality is our reality... but it won't always be. Scripture describes what is to come by reminding us that our life continues beyond this one.

*“I have written this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know you have **eternal life**.”* (1 John 5:13, NLT)

We get unlimited mileage in our new bodies, giving us ample time to:

- **Fellowship with God.** Enjoying a relationship with Him.
- **Serve God.** Not boring, but fulfilling, satisfying work.
- **Worship God.** Joining with millions in praising God.
- **Rest in God.** No more striving and struggling, just peace.

Our glorified, resurrected bodies will forever know the victory that comes through Jesus.



“Then, when our dying bodies have been transformed into bodies that will never die, this Scripture will be fulfilled: “Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” For sin is the sting that results in death, and the law gives sin its power. But thank God! He gives us victory over sin and death through our Lord Jesus Christ.”
(1 Corinthians 15:54–57, NLT)

The Hope of Resurrection (Revelation 2:10-11)



1 Corinthians 15 gives us a better idea of what resurrection and glorification really mean for us as Christians. So now, let's go back and hear the words of Jesus one more time. Let's press play to un-pause and go back to our look at Smyrna in Revelation 2.

Despite facing persecution, Jesus says to the church in Smyrna:

“Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.” (Revelation 2:10b-11)

Those are short words of encouragement, but do you understand now the weight that they carry? Ten days of suffering, maybe a little pain...but then an upgraded body, spirit, and lifetime!

That would give the church immense hope in a dark situation! It would be the kind of promise that would allow them to stand firm regardless of what they faced.

I’m reminded of the words of Ignatius, yet another Christian leader in the early 2nd century. Being sentenced to death for his beliefs, he stated the following:

“Now I begin to be a disciple. I care for nothing, of visible or invisible things, so that I may but win Christ. Let fire and the cross, let the companies of wild beasts, let breaking of bones and tearing of limbs, let the grinding of the whole body, and all the malice of the devil, come upon me; be it so, only may I win Christ Jesus!”⁶

We can’t discount the pain that suffering brings. Ignatius, Polycarp, and the unnamed Christians in Smyrna suffered. But in the end, that suffering was temporary. Even the vilest of punishments seemed like a pinprick when weighed against the crown of life and glorification we will have in Jesus.

Do you share that hope? Do you share that confidence?

Closing

In C.S. Lewis’ book *The Great Divorce*, he shares a picture of the afterlife that excites me. The protagonist is taken from a ghostly, grey, misty bus station into the bright, dense weightiness of glory. He sees his pale existence contrasted with humans who had begun the transformation of resurrection, who were being transformed into magnificent beings with almost unbearable beauty...resurrected so that the clarity of their righteous spirit shone brightly and their robes and crowns flowed out of the spiritual body so that they were as much a feature of the person’s identity as a lip or an eye.

The picture may not be accurate – Lewis is a great author, but his book isn’t Scripture! – but it gets my mind moving and imagining and...hoping.

It is one of my great hopes to see you resurrected. To see you transformed into a man who literally radiates goodness, whose strength and joy are unmatched. To see you as a woman whose grace and kindness crown you in glory and whose voice reverberates

⁶ Foxe’s Book of Martyrs



with the praise of Jesus. Where “love shines not from our faces only, but from all our limbs, as if it were some liquid in which we had just been swimming.”⁷

Do you hope for such a resurrection? Do you long for it?

This tiny, frail shell of a body will be distant memory.

Take a few minutes today and write out the things that you wish were changed – the anxiety, the lust, the anger, the hurt – and remember that none of those have a lasting future with you. The spiritual qualities that the Holy Spirit has begun to create in you will flourish to completion; the sins and failures we’ve carried will be burned away.

The resurrected you will be the *real* you. The glorified me will be the *real* me. Resurrected bodies, resurrected spirits, in the presence of the Eternal God - that is the future for those who are in Jesus Christ. That is the hope we share and the confidence we hold!

That is Polycarp’s hope.

That is the hope of Smyrna Christian Church.

That is the hope of Paul.

So, let me ask you: *Is it your hope?*

Invitation

If so, let the truth motivate you to follow Jesus more closely and prepare you for heaven. If it isn’t, throw off everything that is holding you back!

Why wait? Accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior, put aside anything else that gets in the way (it won’t last anyway! But HE will), and get ready for resurrection – to eternal life, not eternal separation.

I invite you to focus on that hope and your future – your resurrected and glorified future – as we sing our invitation song this morning. If we can help you with that process, we invite you to come forward and talk with me at the conclusion of our service so we can celebrate that decision.

Please stand and let’s sing.

Song: Hymn of Heaven

Prayer/Dismiss

⁷ Paraphrased from *The Great Divorce* (Chapter 12)



Notes

The Letter to Smyrna (Revelation 2:8-11)

A Church Under Pressure

The Hope of New Life

The Details of Resurrection (1 Corinthians 15)

Jesus was Resurrected (1 Corinthians 15:3-8)

The Gospel

Resurrection Matters (1 Corinthians 15:12-19)

Resurrection is Glorification (1 Corinthians 15:50-52)

Upgraded Body (Isaiah 26:19)

Upgraded Spirit (1 Cor 15:53a; Rom 3:10-12; 1 Cor 15:42-44)

Upgraded Lifetime (1 Cor 15:53; 1 John 5:13; 1 Cor 15:54-57)

The Hope of Resurrection (Revelation 2:10-11)

Discussion Questions

Use the following questions based on today's sermon as a starting point for spiritual discussions with your family or a small group of Christian friends this week.

Fellowship—Relationship with a Purpose

- If you could change one thing about your body, what would it be? Why?

Growth—Thinking About Spiritual Matters

- Read Revelation 2:8-11. Describe the situation the church in Smyrna is facing. What would be a normal, human reaction to these pressures?
- How does the description of Jesus in verse 8 solidify the promise of verse 11? Are you more worried about death than you are confident in resurrection?
- If resurrection is NOT true, how would it change your faith? Would anything of Christianity remain? (See 1 Corinthians 15:12-19)
- Since resurrection IS true, what are the results for us? Read 1 Corinthians 15:23-26 as you form your answer.
- How has your body been degraded, corrupted, or weakened over the years? Why is an upgraded body needed for eternity?
- Read 1 Corinthians 15:42-44. How will your glorified, resurrected body differ from your present body? Are you looking forward more to the physical improvements or the spiritual improvements? Why?
- Who is someone you can't wait to see resurrected? What flaws will be corrected in their incorruptible, immortal new body?
- How can you stir up hope for the resurrection with fellow Christians in the church? How might you work it into conversations with people outside of church?

Prayer – Taking Your Thoughts to God

- Thank God in advance for your resurrected, glorified body. Pray that He will remind you of it in times when you are defeated or demoralized.