

Revelation 2:8-11

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"And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this:

'I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say 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 cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until 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 by the second death."

Revelation 2:8-11

We have begun the section concerning "the things which are" (Rev. 1:19), and are listening to Jesus give us a first hand evaluation of what He intends the church to be like. In the last section, we studied the backslidden church of Ephesus who had forgotten their first love. Here we take a look at the persecuted church.

As we talked about earlier, the time period in which the Revelation was given to John was a difficult time period for the church. Persecution was severe. Domitian had spread his emperor worship all throughout the land, and for those who refused to worship him, there were stiff consequences to endure. This Roman emperor worship made Smyrna a very difficult place to live.

It is reported that Smyrna (modern day Izmir, Turkey) was a city that loved its Roman leaders, and was extremely dedicated to serving them. John MacArthur records one incident through which the citizens of Smyrna revealed this extreme dedication.

Smyrna was a long a staunch ally of Rome. In fact, its citizens were so infatuated with Rome that in 195 B.C. they built a temple in which Rome was worshiped. A century later the Roman general Sulla's ill-clad army faced bitter winter weather. When the Roman soldiers' plight was announced in a general assembly of Smyrna's citizens, they reportedly took off their own clothes to send to them. (MacArthur, John: The MacArthur New Testament Commentary; Revelation 1-11, Moody Press, Chicago, Illinois, 1991; pg. 70)

Because emperor worship was encouraged by Rome, and because Smyrna loved Rome so much, any church in Smyrna would have a long row to hoe. Since the Christians of Smyrna refused to worship the emperor, this made Smyrna a place of extreme persecution. The famous early Christian Polycarp was one of the churches

most famous martyrs. Polycarp's supernatural execution is recorded as follows.

After a respite, the Christians again came under persecution this time from Marcus Aurelius, in A.D. 161.

One of those who suffered this time was Polycarp, the venerable bishop of Smyrna. Hearing his captors had arrived one evening. Polycarp left his bed and welcomed them, and then asked for an hour alone to pray. As soon as he had finished his prayers, they put him on an ass and brought him to the city.

As he entered the stadium with his guards, a voice from heaven was heard to say, "Be strong, Polycarp, and play the man." No one nearby saw anyone speaking, but many people heard the voice.

Brought before the tribunal and the crowd, Polycarp refused to deny Christ, although the proconsul begged him: "Consider yourself and have pity on your great age. Reproach Christ and I will release you."

Polycarp replied, "Eighty-six years I have served Him, and He never once wronged me. How can I blaspheme my King, who saved me?"

Threatened with wild beasts and fire, Polycarp stood his ground. "What are you waiting for? Do whatever you please." The crowd demanded Polycarp's death, gathering wood for the fire, and preparing to tie him to the stake.

"Leave me," he said, "He who will give me strength to sustain the fire will help me not to flinch from the pile." So they bound him but didn't nail him to the stake. As soon as Polycarp finished his prayer, fire was lit, but it leaped up around him, leaving him unburned, until the people convinced a soldier to plunge a sword into him. When he did, so much blood gushed out that the fire was immediately extinguished. The soldiers then placed his body into a fire and burned it to ashes, which some Christians later gathered up and buried properly. (Fuxe, John; Fuxe's Book of Martyrs, Barbour Publishing, Urichsville, Ohio, 2001, pg.18)

With such being the persecution in the city of Smyrna, it is no wonder Smyrna's church was heavily persecuted. It was literally a city where the decision to take up your cross daily had to be made every morning.

One can only imagine the intense temptation to deny Christ that the believers in Smyrna must have faced.

They would definitely need to hear from their Lord, and that is exactly what happened. Here we look at Jesus letter to the church in Smyrna.

I. THE COMPOSER

"And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this:

Revelation 2:8

Here once again we see that Jesus identifies Himself in a very specific way to this church. Jesus refers to Himself as **The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life.** After studying chapter one, we are familiar with what He was reminding them of. Jesus reminds the church at Smyrna of His deity, His humanity, and His victory. Jesus is fully God, He is **the first and the last.** Jesus was fully human, which is what we learn by His mortality in that He **was dead.** However, death was not the end for Jesus, He was victorious, for after being dead, He **has come to life.** He reminds this suffering church that He knows exactly what they are going through, and that He has the power to defeat it.

We do not have to even begin to speculate as to the significance of why Jesus revealed Himself in this manner to the church at Smyrna. If any of us have ever endured any manner of difficulty, although probably less severe than that of the believers at Smyrna, then we know how important it is to have a Savior who both understands our pain, and who can defeat the source of it.

The writer of Hebrews reminds us of this wonderful truth. "Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the

power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives. For assuredly He does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the descendant of Abraham. Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.” (Hebrews 2:14-18)

Again the writer of Hebrews encourages us by saying, “For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:15-16) We serve a risen Savior. We serve One who knew every temptation we would ever face, even the temptation to quit.

One can only speculate the amount of anguish that was on Jesus mind that night in the garden when our eternity hung in the balance. For never was there a night in which Jesus was so tempted not to endure. It was in this garden that Jesus said to His disciples, “My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me.” And He went a little beyond *them*, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will.” (Matthew 26:38-39)

Then on the very next day Jesus endured the cruelest of deaths that we can imagine. He knew the temptation to quit during the heat of persecution, but He did not. He knew what it felt like to be killed. He knew what it felt like to step into death. He knew what it felt like to lay in a tomb. But He does not know what it feels like to stay there. Glory to God! We have such a Savior. The sheer remembrance of this truth is enough to comfort a persecuted church, surely this is why Jesus reminded them of it.

So first we see the Composer.

II. THE COMMENDATION

‘I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

Revelation 2:9

Just as He did with the church at Ephesus, Jesus begins His appraisal by pointing out the things that the believers at Smyrna did correctly. It is vitally important that we listen to His praise, that we may one day be able to achieve the same. There are three main things that Jesus reveals about Smyrna and commends them for.

First He commends them concerning their Problems. He said, **“I know your tribulation”**. Not only did Jesus know *of* their tribulation, Jesus *knew* their tribulation. He didn’t just know what they were going through, He knew what it was like to go through what they were going through. The **tribulation** that the church in Smyrna faced was most certainly a difficulty in ministry. It must have been extremely discouraging to try and spread the gospel in a town that had so much love for another god (Rome).

Surely Jesus knew what that was like. As He stood outside of the city of Jerusalem, Jesus would weep as He uttered these words, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. “Behold, your house is being left to you desolate!” (Matthew 23:37-38) Jesus knew what it was to be discouraged with those He was trying to reach.

Upon returning from the mountain where He had been transfigured, Matthew records that a man came up to Jesus, fell on his knees, and said, “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is a lunatic and is very ill; for he often falls into the fire and often into the water. “I brought him to Your

disciples, and they could not cure him." And Jesus answered and said, "You unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him here to Me." (Matthew 17:15-17)

There we see again the disgust that Jesus must have felt because of the littleness of the faith of those He ministered to. Surely Jesus knew their **tribulation**.

Secondly Jesus commends their **Poverty**. He reminds them that He knows what it feels like to be poor on this earth, **(yet you are rich)**. He knows what it means to store up treasure in heaven, instead of treasure on earth. He knows what it feels like to have an eternal perspective. The church at Smyrna had forsaken the world for the cause of Christ, what a wonderful example of what it means to live for tomorrow instead of for today.

When people do this, they can easily become discouraged, as they are allowed to see all the wealth and possessions of unrighteousness that the world accumulates. No doubt there is a temptation to forget about all this **poverty** stuff and put your hand into the pot. Jesus was no stranger to this temptation, as Satan himself tempted Jesus this way, "Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory; and he said to Him, "All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me." Then Jesus said to him, "Go, Satan! For it is written, 'YOU SHALL WORSHIP THE LORD YOUR GOD, AND SERVE HIM ONLY.'" (Matthew 4:8-10) Jesus understood what it meant to seek the eternal reward at the cost of the temporal one.

Thirdly, Jesus commended the church at Smyrna concerning their Persecution. He said, **"I know...the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan."**

The church at Smyrna was even being blasphemed by those who claimed to be religious. This is some of the most difficult persecution we must endure. It is one thing to be persecuted by a person who claims no affiliation to

God whatsoever, but when persecution comes from those who claim to love God, there is an added sting.

Jesus knew what that felt like as well. For He continually had bouts with the most religiously zealous group of them all; the Pharisees.

The Jews answered and said to Him, "Do we not say rightly that You are a Samaritan and have a demon?" Jesus answered, "I do not have a demon; but I honor My Father, and you dishonor Me. "But I do not seek My glory; there is One who seeks and judges. "Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps My word he will never see death." The Jews said to Him, "Now we know that You have a demon. Abraham died, and the prophets *also*; and You say, 'If anyone keeps My word, he will never taste of death.' "Surely You are not greater than our father Abraham, who died? The prophets died too; whom do You make Yourself out *to be*?" Jesus answered, "If I glorify Myself, My glory is nothing; it is My Father who glorifies Me, of whom you say, 'He is our God'; and you have not come to know Him, but I know Him; and if I say that I do not know Him, I will be a liar like you, but I do know Him and keep His word. "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw *it* and was glad." So the Jews said to Him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am." Therefore they picked up stones to throw at Him, but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple. (John 8:48-59)

Jesus knew exactly what it was like to have "so-called" followers of God malign and attack you. For this He commends the church at Smyrna.

We must understand how valuable all these attributes were. If we are truly to be called followers of Jesus, then we must share in His attributes. If we are a church that does not suffer tribulation, then we are not walking as Jesus intended, for He said, "In the world you have tribulation," (John 16:33). If we do not, we must wonder if we are truly following Jesus.

If do not live at all in poverty, we must wonder if we are walking like Jesus intended for us to walk. "As they were going along the road, someone said to Him, "I will

follow You wherever You go.” And Jesus said to him, “The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.” (Luke 9:57-58) If we have no poverty, if we have in no way forsaken the things of this world, are we really rich?

If we do not suffer persecution, we must wonder if we are following as Jesus intended for us to follow, for He taught us, “It is enough for the disciple that he become like His teacher, and the slave like His master. If they have called the head of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign the members of his household!” (Matthew 10:25). If are not suffering any persecution, we must ask ourselves if we really look at all like Jesus.

The church at Smyrna did look like Jesus, and for that Jesus commended them. Their love was genuine, and it stood the test. They were a living example of what Jesus intended when He said, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me.” (Luke 9:23) They were a church to be commended.

So first we see the Composer, secondly we see the commendation.

III. THE COMMAND

'Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Revelation 2:10

You will quickly notice that unlike the church at Ephesus, the church at Smyrna has no critique. There is nothing in them that Jesus desires to correct. Surely this doesn't mean they were without sin, but whatever sin must have been present was definitely very limited, for the Bible

teaches, “Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin.” (1 Peter 4:1)

If a church is willing to be so dedicated to the calling of the Lord that they would allow themselves to suffer physical persecution, then rest assured the daily trivial temptation of sin is not much of a temptation. If a person would be willing to suffer the loss of life for obedience, then certainly the loss of possessions is no worry. The church at Smyrna had no critique from the Lord.

However, due to the extreme persecution they were facing, and because Jesus knew the temptation they must have been facing to quit, He does have two commands for them. But before we get to the commands He issues, let us look at what this church must yet endure.

Jesus revealed to them that their persecution had not yet fully run its course. For He said, **“Do not fear what you are about to suffer.”** He knew that they were not yet finished having to endure. They would **suffer** still more. Jesus knew this church, and He knew their obedience. Because of this, He knew that suffering was still to come.

Any church that is truly obedient to the word of Christ can expect the same. For Jesus said, “You will be hated by all because of My name, but it is the one who endures to the end who will be saved.” (Matthew 10:22). Paul told Timothy, “Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” (2 Timothy 3:12).

What can we expect as a church? If we carry the name of Jesus, expect to be hated by all. If we desire to live godly in Christ Jesus, expect to be persecuted. If we are not hated by all; if we are not persecuted, then it is time to do the math. All we can conclude is that we have a confession problem, for we obviously are not taking Jesus name; and we have a passion problem, for we obviously do not desire to live godly. Because the church at Smyrna did not have a confession or a passion problem, they could expect more suffering.

Jesus also revealed to them where this trial would come from. He said, **“Behold, the devil”** is the one who will do this to you.

There are many today who do not believe that the church will go through the Great Tribulation. I agree with them. The Great Tribulation is God’s wrath poured out on those who failed to believe. However, do not be fooled into assuming that the church will not go through a great tribulation. The reason is because **the devil** hates us, he knows his fate, and he will not go down without a fight.

The word **“devil”** literally means slanderer, and that is exactly what he does to God’s chosen. He is the “accuser of the brethren...he who accuses them before our God day and night.” (Revelation 12:10). Perhaps you remember the story of Job, and how Satan incited God to persecute him. (Job 1:6-12; 2:1-3) Peter had a similar experience. “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat.” (Luke 22:31) We, like Smyrna, can expect persecution for taking the name of Jesus, because that ancient slanderer hates us.

Jesus then revealed to them the purpose of their trial. He said, **“Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested.”** This is a vitally important thing that must occur in the church. Jesus Himself reminded us that there are many tares which are growing, right along side the wheat. (Matthew 13:24-30). He also reminded us of the presence of “wolves in sheep’s clothing” otherwise known as “false prophets”. The only way we would know them is “by their fruit” (Matthew 7:15-16). What is it that can reveal the fruit of a false prophet? What is it that can cause the tares to show themselves as different from the wheat? The answer is simple: testing.

The only way to know who will endure is to apply pressure to everyone. “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of

His glory you may rejoice with exultation.” (1 Peter 4:12-13) James said it a little differently. “Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; *for once he has been approved*, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.” (James 1:12 *emphasis added*). This is no pretty picture, and it is no easy truth to swallow, but the question before us is the one that was before Smyrna. Would I be willing to die for Jesus? We will find out.

Jesus also spoke of the length of the trial that Smyrna would face. He said, **“you will have tribulation for ten days.”** There are many who see the **ten** here as something symbolic. Indeed, theologians who are much smarter than I may be able to apply something greater here. But for our purposes let us just understand this one simple truth. The tribulation of Satan is temporary. The tribulation of God is eternal. Satan will only be able to hit Smyrna **for ten days**. Regardless of the length that actually represents, let us understand that no matter how bad the persecution becomes, we can hope for a better day. “These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33)

Finally, Jesus even revealed just how severe the trials of Satan would be. He said, **“Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”** It could not have been comforting to know that following Jesus could demand their very lives. However, it would be deceptive to pretend that following Jesus would produce anything less.

Did Jesus not say tell us “he who does not take up his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake will find it.” (Matthew 10:38-39). Exactly what did we think the cross was for? Did we assume it to be only a symbol that we put on a T-shirt, or a piece of art that we hang from the Baptistry? The cross is brutal, the cross is bloody, the cross symbolizes a cruel, torturous death, and if we follow Jesus, the cross is ours to bear.

Do not live under any misunderstandings. If we are to follow Christ, then we will follow where He went. Yes ultimately that is glory in heaven, but the road to glory in heaven first travels through Golgotha. "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it." (Matthew 7:13-14)

Now that we see what Jesus has promised to the church at Smyrna, let us look at the two commands that He issued to them.

First, we see a command concerning **Fear**. Jesus said, "**Do not fear what you are about to suffer.**" Now there is a statement to dwell on a second. Jesus has just told them they can expect more of the same, and they can even expect this difficulty to step up a notch, ultimately leading to death. But even though they were staring death in the face Jesus said, "**Do not fear.**" How can this be?

How can one stare death in the face and not fear? Answer: you must have extreme, overpowering, dedicated, real, lasting, God-granted, faith. Without it, you will never be able to get that knot out of your stomach that appears every time you think of dying for Christ. We must have a faith that realizes death is not the end, but the beginning. "O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Corinthians 15:56-57)

If we have a major fear problem, it is nothing less than a major faith problem. Do we not believe Jesus can give us eternal life? Do we not believe His grace is sufficient? Do we not believe that "DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP in victory"? (1 Cor. 15:54). Do we not believe that "because I live, you will live also"? (John 14:19) If we truly believe all these things, then **do not fear**.

And if that fear is such that it persuades us to stop our work of perseverance, then may we listen to another truth of Jesus. He taught us to fight fear with fear. "Do not

fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." (Matthew 10:28) The enemy may be big, but Jesus is bigger! **Do not fear.**

The second command Jesus gave Smyrna was a command concerning Faithfulness. He told them, "**be faithful until death.**" In other words, don't ever stop living for Me. This is important for us to realize, for while fear can be covered, faithfulness cannot. Though we may be able to pretend like we are not afraid; though we may be able to convince those around us that we would die for Jesus; our actions will tell the truest story. It is a question of if we will truly be **faithful**, even to the point that it costs us our very lives.

This is not only expected, it is commanded. After Paul reminded us that death holds no victory, he went on to say, "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord." (1 Corinthians 15:58)

We must ask ourselves the question: If we aren't **faithful until death** are we really saved? The answer here seems to be, "no", since it is our faithfulness that earns the **crown of life**. It is not that we can earn this **crown** by becoming a martyr, but the truth remains, if we are truly a follower of Jesus, then death won't stop us. "And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when faced with death." (Rev. 12:10) Jesus reminded us, "He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal." (John 12:25)

We can all learn from the command of Jesus. Smyrna was a commended persecuted church, but even they were commanded to continue, for one time action means nothing if not accompanied by perseverance. I can outrun Carl Lewis in the 100 meter dash if he quits after 90 meters. I can single handedly defeat the Dallas Cowboys if

they stop after three quarters. Great action without great perseverance falls short of what Jesus expects of us. This leads us to our final point.

IV. THE CONNOTATION

'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.'

Revelation 2:10

Of course now we get to the point where Jesus takes what He has taught the church at Smyrna and asks us all to pay attention. **"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."** Jesus intends for us to now learn from the example that He has given us in the church at Smyrna. We must learn that it is worthy of the reward of Jesus if we are willing to live like Him. He commends those who are willing to endure tribulation, poverty, and blasphemy by those who are "so-called" Christians. He commends those who look enough like Him that they are treated like Him.

We must also learn what is expected of us from this point on. Perseverance is the name of the game. We must not stop until Jesus returns to take us home. That is why Jesus gives us all this final admonition. **"He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death."** Again we must ask, "He who overcomes what?"

Certainly Jesus is talking to those who overcome the temptation to allow difficulty to stunt their growth, or stop their ministry, or deny the faith all together. It is a temptation to quit.

I have no doubt that everyone who has followed Jesus has faced it at one point or another. Jeremiah was ready to throw his hands up and call it quits (Jeremiah 20:9) as was Elijah (I Kings 19:4) and even Peter (Matthew

26:69-74), but these men didn't. They may have stumbled, but they didn't fall. They may have had moments of fear and self-pity, but they persevered. And because they persevered they were **not hurt by the second death**. We will not be hurt by it either.

Of course we know what the **second death** is. "Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire." (Revelation 20:14) Eternal destruction in hell is the **second death**, but if we prove our faith through our perseverance, and if we overcome the fear to quit, this **second death** will not hurt us. We must be a church that perseveres, for what have we to fear. The sons of Korah do an excellent job of demonstrating the faith we are to have in the presence of a very real and present danger.

Psalm 46:1-11

For the choir director. A *Psalm* of the sons of Korah, set to Alamo. A Song.

God is our refuge and strength,
A very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change
And though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea;
Though its waters roar *and* foam,
Though the mountains quake at its swelling pride.
Selah.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
The holy dwelling places of the Most High.
God is in the midst of her, she will not be moved;
God will help her when morning dawns.
The nations made an uproar, the kingdoms tottered;
He raised His voice, the earth melted.
The LORD of hosts is with us;
The God of Jacob is our stronghold.
Selah.

Come, behold the works of the LORD,
Who has wrought desolations in the earth.
He makes wars to cease to the end of the earth;
He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two;

He burns the chariots with fire.

"Cease *striving* and know that I am God;

I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth."

The LORD of hosts is with us;

The God of Jacob is our stronghold.

Selah.