



*to the*  
**SEVEN CHURCHES**  
REVELATION 2:8-11

**Sunday, May 29, 2022**

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The earliest account of a Christian martyr, outside of the New Testament, is of a man named Polycarp. Polycarp was a student of the Apostle John, who wrote of the book of Revelation, and eventually John actually ordained Polycarp to be the bishop, the elder, the pastor of the Church in the city of Smyrna. So, that all happened when Polycarp was a young man, in his 20s and 30s. But decades later, around the year 155, Polycarp's life was being threatened.

It probably wasn't the first time. The same document that tells the story of Polycarp's death tells of the Smyrnan church suffering persecution for years, as members of their church had been tortured, burned alive, sent to fight wild animals in the arena, even stretched out on beds of spikes in order to try to get them to deny Christ, participate in the Roman religious rituals, and worship the Roman emperor.

So, Polycarp was not the first martyr of the Smyrnan church. But he was their leader, and so, when the calls for his arrest began to be made, the church wanted him to run, to flee the city, but Polycarp didn't want to. He wanted to stay with his church, he was in his late 80s. He didn't want to run.

But, eventually, his congregation convinced him: At least get out of the city. Go stay in a house in the countryside, where it will be harder to find you. So, Polycarp went, he went and stayed in this little country house, spending most of his days in prayer, until eventually, the law found him.

So, they took him back to the arena. See, Smyrna had one of the largest gladiatorial arenas in the region, and whenever there would be a big fight night, where the professional gladiators would in the evening, executions would happen in the afternoon. So, the arena would be filled with a blood-thirsty mob—eager to see someone die. And on this particular day, as the local officials and Polycarp entered the stadium, the crowd grew louder and louder as they realized that Polycarp, the leader of the church, was the one who was being put on trial.

Polycarp was stood up in front of the judge, who tried to reason with him: "Polycarp, you are an old man. All you have to do is swear by Caesar—say "Away with the atheists" (Christians were called atheists at the time because they didn't believe in the whole gamut of Roman gods). Swear the oath, reject the Christ."

And Polycarp looked at him and said, in one of the most famous quotes in the early church: “86 years I have been his servant, and Christ has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” He would be put to the pyre and burned alive not long after—though tradition holds that the fire did not burn him, and he had to be stabbed by the executioner.

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We are currently working through the first few chapters of the book of Revelation, which primarily in chapters 2-3, includes letters to seven specific churches throughout what is now the country of Turkey. And we’re spending some significant time on these seven letters because they almost serve as the key, the interpretive grid to reading the entire Book of Revelation. The Book of Revelation, we’ve said, is often misunderstood as some codebook that was only meant to be unlocked by symbols and signs at the end of the world—but the Book of Revelation is primarily a letter.

It is a letter to Christians living at the end of the first century, Christians who are suffering, Christians who are sinning, Christians who are trying to figure out how to live in a broken world as they wait for their savior to return.

And while other letters in the New Testament—like Romans or 1 Corinthians—use imperatives (commands) or doctrinal statements to encourage and instruct the church, the book of Revelation primarily uses visions—images and symbols, numbers and colors—to encourage and instruct the church. But before we get to most of those visions—Jesus is kind enough to clue us in on the primary themes of Revelation through these brief, specific “letters” to the seven churches.

And the seven churches here are specific, literal churches, but they’re also symbolic. It’s not a coincidence that seven churches are addressed. There were more churches in the region at the time, but “seven”—as we’ve talked about before—is a symbolic number that represents the entire church, throughout all time. And as we see in these seven letters, these churches are kind of in a mixed state. They are struggling with a wide variety of things and have a wide variety of health in their midst. And so, while these churches are specific, literal churches, the issues that Jesus addresses among them, are common to the church as a whole—which will experience different levels of health and need different applications in different places and times.

Last week, Pastor Ethan preached on Jesus’ words to the church in Ephesus, a church that seemed to be vibrant and healthy, but had forgotten her first love—reminding us of the need to be saturated with love for Christ and one another in everything we do as followers of Christ.

And this week, we get to hear from Jesus as he addresses the church in Smyrna—the home church of Polycarp. And the theme of this letter is simple: **Do not fear suffering.**

And there are three ways this letter builds up to this primary theme, three things we are going to look at: The Reality of Suffering, the Possibility of Courage, and the Assurance of Reward.

We will get back to the text in just a moment, but before we do that, let's pray.

## 1. The Reality of Suffering

The first thing that we see in this sermon of Christ's is the inevitable reality of suffering in the world for Christians. Not every Christian is going to suffer everywhere all the time, not every church is going to suffer the same fate everywhere all the time, but suffering will be a common part of existence both for individual Christians and churches as a whole.

And that, of course, is the primary theme of this entire message from Christ.

Now, you may already recognize this, but each of these messages, these "letters", follow a certain pattern. They begin by addressing the specific church and describing Jesus as the author of this message, describing him with some aspect of the vision that we saw of him back in chapter 1. Then follows a description of what is currently happening in the church, then a call to action, and then finally a promise of reward and/or judgment depending on whether or not the Church obeys Christ's call to action.

So, in summary:

- Characteristic of Christ, the author
- Characteristics of the church, the recipient
- Call to action
- Promise of a just reward

Now, when Jesus describes the characteristics of the church in Smyrna, what does he say about them in verse 9? They are suffering! "I know your tribulation—your poverty and slander."

And what does he say to them when he calls them to action? That they are going to continue to suffer—in fact, their suffering is going to increase—go from poverty and slander to prison, and even death.

Suffering was a constant reality in the Smyrnan church—and it is a common, inevitable reality for Christians.

Now, there are different kinds of suffering that are inevitable for Christians. On one hand, there is the general suffering that is common to the human experience as we live amidst a broken world. And oh, have we been reminded that we live in a broken world. Whether it is passing the 1-million death mark due to COVID-19, being reminded of the horrors of abortion as the potential of a *Roe vs. Wade* overturn hit the news, or hearing of more than 30 people murdered in shootings in a grocery store and elementary school in the span of just two weeks—we know the world is broken.

Sometimes we can medicate ourselves for a period of time with our little spheres of comfort and ease, until heartbreak and tragedy bring life to a crashing stop. Suffering is inevitable.

But the suffering that Jesus is describing in the Smyrnan church is different than the suffering that is common to all. What is described here is tribulation and persecution—suffering that occurs not simply because one exists but because one follows Jesus.

Poverty is the first thing that he mentions for the Smyrnans. We've talked about this over the last two weeks, but in the first and second centuries, Christians often suffered economic hardship for a variety of reasons. Smyrna was one of the largest cities in the region and as a port city it had a thriving economy. But, by not participating in the local and Roman religious practices, Christians often put a very real ceiling on their earning potential. Many jobs were off-limits to Christians because they required membership in trade guilds that included sacrifices to specific gods. And if a Christian seller of goods, like grain, didn't sacrifice to the Roman god of agriculture, then potential patrons may have avoided buying from them out of fear of getting a lesser product. Regardless of the specific reason, the Smyrnan church is in poverty because of their faith.

Jesus also says that the Smyrnan church was suffering slander. Now, there are a couple different ways that Christians would be slandered in the ancient world. On one hand, Christians could be the target of general rumor-mongering and derogatory language. I mentioned a few weeks ago that Christians were often accused of cannibalism (because they talked of eating the body and blood of Jesus), incest (because they talked of loving their brothers and sisters), atheism (because they rejected all Gods but their own), and disloyalty to the Roman empire (because they refused to participate in the worshipping of Caesar).

But, Christians could also be subject to a specific type of slander called “denunciation”—where a person would be brought forward to the Roman officials and charged with a specific crime. This is what the Jews in Corinth in Acts 18, and it seems to be what happened to Polycarp in Smyrna—what was referenced at the beginning of this sermon. And it was this kind of slander that led to being put in prison and put to death.

So, no matter whether Christians were facing specific, official financial or legal persecution—or if it was more informal, with a lesser status in society and lesser materialistic opportunities, the Smyrnan church was expected to suffer—at least materially—because they followed Christ.

And, brothers and sisters, if we do not expect persecution as a part of following Christ—if we buy into the lie that as long as we have enough faith, our lives will be comfortable, happy, and blessed, then we have missed a massive chunk of New Testament instruction.

- “The world hates you because I chose you out of the world” Jesus said (John 15:19).
- “All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,” Paul said to Timothy (2 Timothy 3:12).
- “Do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes to test you,” Peter said (1 Peter 4:12).

So, brothers and sisters, you should not expect to be as wealthy and comfortable as your non-Christian neighbors! Not if you’re living into the kind of radical generosity Jesus commanded, not if you’re refusing to make money your master, not if you’re refusing to engage in ethically sketchy practices. Your economic ceiling is almost always going to be lower than the one whose god is their wallet, their comfort, and their status.

And you should not be surprised when the world slanders the Church. Now, there are times when the Church has deserved her slander, when the Church has so loved her power, has so been afraid of conflict, that she has excused the most heinous of actions. So-called Christians deserve their harsh criticism for covering up sexual abuse, for propping up chattel slavery, for the Crusades—and more.

But even when the Church is as pure as can be, as meek and gentle, and Christlike—she will be persecuted. In the West, she will be slandered for teaching the sexual ethics of the Word. She will be slandered for not bowing to the idol of personal autonomy. And following the example of Christ in turning the other cheek means we will not have the satisfaction of delivering back a stinging, slanderous blow of our own—but enduring persecution meekly and faithfully.

But suffering experienced by Christians is not a sign that God is displeased with them! On the contrary, this sermon from Christ to the church indicates that the Smyrnans are some of the most beloved of Christ's sheep. Of the seven letters in Revelation, only two of them are totally positive, without any sort of critique. The Smyrnans' circumstances might seem as if God is displeased with them, but Jesus sends this message to them that they might know: They are rich with faith, and with the favor of their Lord.

Which brings us to our next point.

## **2. The Possibility of Courage**

Now, if the first thing we see in this sermon is the inevitability of suffering, even for the most faithful of Christians, the second thing we see is the possibility of courage.

“Do not fear what you are about to suffer.” Christ says. “Be faithful” even “unto” the most devastating of circumstances, “death”. Jesus is telling the Smyrnans that their suffering is not punishment from him, but an opportunity for them to exhibit a supernatural courage.

Our natural, common response to suffering is fear. When suffering is on the horizon, we are driven by fear of that suffering. When suffering is present, we are driven by fear of that suffering continuing, or intensifying.

Look at the world around us. Fear is the world's go-to response—look at how we respond to tragedy, how we respond to political controversy. How much of it is driven by fear? And I think I could make a pretty compelling argument that it is both sides of the political aisle that—more often than not, are driven first and foremost by fear.

John Flavel, an English Puritan minister in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, wrote this about fear:

“Among all the creatures God has made, man is the most apt and able to be his own tormentor; and of all the scourges with which he lashes and afflicts both his mind and body, none is found so cruel and intolerable as his own fears... fear inflicts the deepest and most dangerous wounds upon the mind of man.... The grief we suffer from evil would be light and easy, were it not incensed by fear; reason would do much, and religion more, soothe and alleviate our sorrows, did not fear betray the assistance of both.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Works of John Flavel*, III.239-240. The work from which this quote was taken was originally titled *A Practical Treatise on Fear*. It has also recently been republished by Reformation Heritage Books under the title *Triumphing Over Sinful Fear*.

He goes on to say that what fear does is that it takes the “evils of tomorrow and brings them upon today”—and so makes us weak and powerless to endure either today or tomorrow. Fear is an insidious thing, but it is our go-to response.

And Jesus knows that this is our go-to response. But instead of sliding into our weak, toothless patterns of fear, Jesus calls his church to respond to the prospect of suffering with courage and faithfulness. Now, if we are left to our own devices, then the prospect of facing suffering with courage is laughable. Of course, we should fear suffering! If this life is all we have, and our own efforts are all we have, then we should fear suffering and allow that fear to drive us to do whatever it takes to avoid that suffering! But the purpose of Christ’s message here is to remind the Smyrnans—and us—that we are not alone in our suffering.

And this is the root of where our courage comes from, friends: the character of our Lord Jesus who is in our midst. It’s fascinating, I think, that all seven of these sermons in these two chapters begin with a particular characteristic of Jesus—images from the vision John had in chapter 1 of Jesus. And they’re not random. Every characteristic is particularly, carefully matched with the church and what they need. It is a stunning reminder that no matter the wide variety of the needs of Christ’s church, he possesses in himself every solution.

Take the Smyrnan church, for example. Look at how Christ’s characteristics in this letter, equip them to be courageous.

(1) We see in this letter that Jesus is the Almighty God, the first and the last—which means the suffering of his people falls under his authority. And look what he says in verse 10, their suffering is being utilized for their “testing.”

This is common refrain throughout the New Testament, that while Satan and the world might utilize suffering for the destruction of God’s people, God is the ultimate king even over their suffering, and he is working it together for their good!

This is what James says at the beginning of his letter:

“Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:2-4).

This is what Peter said in 1 Peter 1 (v. 6-7): that trials “test the genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

This is why Paul said in Romans 5 that “we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character

produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."

The reality that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are sovereign over all things, including our most painful moments of suffering, means that we can have courage in the face of all suffering—we can face the Devil who throws Christians into prison, the slanderers who insult and accuse falsely, even Death itself when it rears its ugly head, and we can say as Joseph did to Pharaoh: "What you meant for evil, God meant for good."

(2) We also see in this letter that Jesus is the all-seeing God—and in seeing the full extent of the suffering, Jesus promises that it will be limited.

To the Smyrnans, Jesus says that their suffering will be limited to 10 days. Now, as we've said before, in Revelation, numbers generally are not literal, but symbolic. And we know for a fact that the Smyrnan church suffered for far longer than 10 days—Polycarp was martyred decades after Revelation was written, and persecution there in Turkey has lasted even to modern times.

So, no, the 10 days that Jesus cites here is not literal. It's symbolic. It symbolizes that their suffering will not last forever, but is in the hands of Christ himself, and he will bring their suffering to an end one day. The suffering is not purposeless and endless, but has a definite start and stop. In our suffering, in the midst of it, it is impossible to see the beginning and end, it often feels as if this is just the new normal and we will never have relief. But Jesus says to the Smyrnans, "Do not fear! Though it may not feel it, your suffering will have a definite end! I know the day and the hour at which it will end, so have hope."

And the book of Revelation is full of examples of pictures of these realities. You don't have to turn their right now. But in Revelation chapter 11, a vision is given to John of these two individuals, two witnesses.

And these witnesses are given a specific time frame: 1260 days—three and a half years—to witness to the reign of Christ and to prophesy coming judgment.

And while they are in the specific time in which they are supposed to witness in this dark world, they are protected. They are protected by the Lord for these 1260 days but eventually they are killed—when their testimony had finished.

When the time that God specifically set for them to be his witnesses, in the world had ended, this is what Revelation 11 says: "when they have finished their testimony, the beast that rises from the bottomless pit will make war on them and conquer them and kill them,<sup>8</sup> and their dead bodies will lie in the street."

He goes on to describe how the world would laugh and mock and rejoice at the death of suffering of the church.

And it's a reminder that the Lord is completely sovereign over the Church's witness in the world. He will protect her for time—but there will be time when it seems as if the Enemy has won. But just as the church was given a specific time to witness, so they are given a specific time to remain dead.

“But after the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood up on their feet, and great fear fell on those who saw them. <sup>12</sup> Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, “Come up here!” And they went up to heaven in a cloud, and their enemies watched them.”

And just as the Smyrnan church could read themselves into that story, so can we, friends. The Lord knows exactly how long he is going to use you to be his witness, and he knows exactly how long your suffering will continue. And Death and suffering never have the last word.

(3) Finally, we also see that the Jesus himself is the suffering Redeemer—he died and rose again, and he will empathize with his people.

Jesus doesn't just “know” the suffering of his people because he can see it from above, but he intimately and vividly knows it, because he himself underwent the same kind of slander, the same kind of poverty, persecution, imprisonment, and even death.

He underwent that suffering knowingly, on our behalf. And while the Church often times does deserve the slander that she receives, he never did—and yet he did not fear, he was faithful unto death—that he might purchase for us life everlasting. We can have courage in the face of suffering because our Savior empathizes with us, he knows our limits, and he is sovereign to utilize every testing for our good.

### **3. The Assurance of Reward**

But not only does Jesus equip his followers to lay aside fear by turning their eyes to the character of his person, but he also motivates them to faithful courage by assuring them of reward. That is the third and final point this morning: The Assurance of Reward.

Should one remain faithful to Christ through suffering, even unto death, and Jesus promises to gift them with the crown of life.

Many of you have probably seen pictures or symbols of the olive branch wreaths that would be woven together and given to Olympic athletes in ancient times. If you remember, back in 2004, when the summer Olympics were held in Athens, the birthplace of the Olympic games, victorious athletes actually were given olive wreath crowns to commemorate the ancient tradition, and the 2004 Olympic logo included a graphic of an olive branch wreath. It was a symbol of honor that comes from victory—a just reward for a race well run.

And that is the picture that Christ paints for his people here, that should they conquer, they would receive a glorious reward. The reward isn't the crown itself, the crown is just symbolizing that there is a reward, no, the reward itself is... life! Life!

Real, meaningful, safe, joyful, glorious life!

He goes on to say that the one who conquers will be protected from the second death.

It is the necessary reminder that this life is not all we have. You do not only live once—though everything (our senses, the world around us, the urgency of our pain and suffering) may seem to be telling us that this is our one shot to live and be happy and achieve! No, instead, Jesus—and the entire book of Revelation—is reminding his people that this life is but a shadow of the real life yet to come.

I try to read the Chronicles of Narnia series somewhat regularly, at least every few years, because I find that C.S. Lewis' imagination has a way of putting things into words that I simply can't, and one of the pictures I find myself going back to again and again is the end of the final book. In the final chapters, all of the best characters from the seven books—the children, the talking animals, the good dwarves and giants, they find themselves taken out of Narnia as the world comes to an end. And they find themselves somewhere new—a place that Aslan, the great Lion, has prepared for them.

And they begin to realize that this new place looks a lot like their old home, they can see some of the old landmarks and familiar riverbends, but something is a little different. Lewis describes that as being deeper and richer—"a country where every rock and flower and blade of grass looked as if it meant more."<sup>2</sup>

And at one point, one of the characters kind of puts everybody's thoughts into words: He says, "I have come home at last. This is my real country. I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, but I never knew it until now! The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that sometimes it looked a little like this."

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<sup>2</sup> Lewis, C.S. *The Last Battle*. p. 171

Friends, we must remind ourselves of the future that is promised to people of God, the promise of resurrection, the promise of a new body, in a new earth to dwell in, the promise that all of our earthly sorrow will be flipped upside down and turned into everlasting joy, the promise of heavenly life with Jesus.

Because that is the real life that you were made for!

Sometimes we toss aside the promise of eternal life and heaven as if it's just a useless distraction in the present, but the promise of eternal life is immensely practical now—it is the foundation for courage in the face of suffering. That's why Jesus gives these promises to the church—in order to prompt them to courage to faithfulness. You would wait in line for a concert for hours if you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that it is going to be the best concert you've ever seen.

John Calvin once wrote that a Christian has only made solid progress in the Gospel when they have acquired the habit of meditating continually on their future resurrection.<sup>3</sup>

And it is for that reason that the last three chapters of Revelation are so meaningful to me. If you get nothing else from this series, brothers and sisters, I hope that Revelation 20, 21, and 22 become chapters of the Bible that you return to again and again. For today, hear this vision from chapter 21:

**Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup> And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. <sup>4</sup> He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”**

**<sup>5</sup> And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” <sup>6</sup> And he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. <sup>7</sup> The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. <sup>8</sup> But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually**

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<sup>3</sup> *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III.xxv.2

**immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”**

Brothers and sisters, you and I deserve not merely one death, but two. We are naturally cowardly, faithless, detestable, murderers, sexually immoral, idolaters, liars. But Jesus Christ, the king of kings and Lord of Lords, faithfully submitted himself to the most unjust suffering and death in order to protect you from that second death, in order to equip you to conquer the suffering of this world and enter into life everlasting with him.

So, as you go, do not fear the suffering that is about to come upon you. For the one who is the first and the last, who died but is alive forever more, has all of your suffering in his hand, he will use it for your good, and he will be present with you in it.

Fix your eyes upon him, conquer not by avoiding suffering, but by enduring it, and he will crown you with life everlasting.