

Be Faithful To The God Who Is Faithful To You
Revelation 2:8-11

We're in a series called Final Notice and we're listening to letters written to The Seven Churches of Revelation. Last week we began with Return to Your First Love from the letter to the church at Ephesus.

This is the second letter, and it is to the church of Smyrna. The route of the 7 letters begins in Ephesus, and proceeds clockwise Smyrna is today. Next week will be Pergamum, then Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

Every letter focuses on one truth. Last week, Ephesus had lost their first love. They loved God, but they didn't love him first.

Smyrna's people were going through a trial. Smyrna is called the persecuted church. They were the most persecuted of the seven cities. Jesus was saying to them from the beginning, "I'm faithful. I have been faithful, I am faithful and I'm going to be faithful."

The name Smyrna has an interesting meaning. It is the Greek word for myrrh. In the gospel of Matthew, the wise men came to Jesus and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The Greek word there is Smyrna, and the word referred to a spice, a balm, or a perfume.

Smyrna had a medical use in the days of Jesus. When Jesus was crucified, someone came to him and offered him wine mixed with myrrh. It was also used to embalm people who had died. In John 19, when Jesus was buried, we are told that the disciples wrapped him in a long linen cloth in which they had placed many spices and myrrh. Myrrh was sold in great quantities in the city of Smyrna.

Smyrna was a very refined city. It was one of the most beautiful cities in the world. It was located at the gulf of Smyrna where the hills of Asia Minor overlooked the Aegean Sea with beautiful bays and mountains in the background.

It was a free city. It had its own government. It did not have to pay taxes to the Roman Empire. It was the birthplace of the Greek poet Homer. It was built and designed by Alexander the Great. It was a model city.

The streets were wide, spacious, and all paved. The streets ran at perfect right angles to each other, from one end of the city to the other. There is one street that became so famous that it was called the golden street. It began at the sea and ran all the way through the entire city, it was a magnificent street that was lined with various temples dedicated to the many gods they worshipped. On one side of the street would be a temple to the goddess Syble. On another side a temple to Apollo, on the next side a temple to Aesculapius, the god of healing. Passed that stood the beautiful temple to the goddess Aphrodite. The street continued winding its way up until it ended at the temple of the Greek god Zeus. The end of that street was the largest theatre in the world, Mt. Pagos which seated more than 20,000 people.

Smyrna was a very rich city. It was a seaport. Its harbor was one of the finest in all of the world and could be entirely closed off in times of war. Ships could find space to dock and unload their cargo. Smyrna was a marketing metropolis. Smyrna is the present city of Izmir, Turkey, a very wealthy and prosperous city of almost half a million people.

It was a very religious city. Beyond all of the other gods that were worshipped there, Smyrna was also the center of Caesar worship.

"And to the angel of the church of Smyrna write, 'These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life: 'I know your works, tribulation, and poverty; but you are rich. I know the blasphemy of those who

say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear any of those things which you're about to suffer. Indeed, the devil's about to throw some of you into prison that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. 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. "He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death."
Revelation 2:8

1. The Problems Of The Church

The church at Smyrna is only one of two churches out of the seven which receives absolutely no criticism from the Lord Jesus Christ, yet it was one church that probably had the most problems.

Sometimes problems are a sign of God's blessing rather than God's curse, but God will be faithful.

If you're going through a trial, remember God's faithfulness, you need to remember God is consistent.

There are three contrasts in the first part:

First and Last
Dead, but was alive
Poverty, but rich

"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, says the Lord. Who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." Revelation 1:8

Isaiah writes 750 years before Christ, *"Thus says the Lord", "The king of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: 'I am the First and I am the Last; Besides Me there is no God.'" Isaiah 44:6*

"Listen to me, O Jacob, And Israel, My called: I am He, I am the First, I am also the Last". Isaiah 48:12

About eight verses from the end of the Bible.

"I am the Alpha and the Omega. The Beginning and the End, the First and the Last." Revelation 22:13

Alpha and Omega are the first letters and the last letter of the Greek alphabet. For English, we would say, "I am the A and the Z".

"I know your works." Revelation 2:9

This was a church that loved the Lord, loved the work of Lord, and was being faithful. But it was a church floating in the seas of trouble, trial, and tribulation.

Jesus was saying, I've always been faithful. He's saying this to the persecuted church. I've always been faithful, I am faithful, and I will always be faithful. You need to know, even though you're going through a trial and you're about to go through some more trials.

The Greek language uses double negatives to emphasize things. God is saying, I have never not been faithful. I have always been faithful. I am faithful. And I always will be faithful.

Smyrna was a city that boasted that they were dead and came back to life. They almost become a ghost town, but they brought their economy back to life. Smyrna was a port city like Ephesus. But they boasted that they were dead and came back to life.

Jesus says, I was actually dead, and I'm the one that came back to life, and I'm still living and I'm still speaking 65 years after the resurrection, and I'm still here. I'm still guiding and I'm still protecting.

- The Problem Of Persecution

"I know your works, your tribulation." Revelation 2:9

The word for tribulation is the word tylosis. The word means "pressure." The Romans executed people by placing a heavy rock on top of them. The weight of the rock would gradually crush them to death. This word was also used to picture the grinding of wheat into flour, or the crushing of grapes into juice. The word also means "to be crushed."

This word specifically refers to suffering for the Lord Jesus Christ. Why were these Christians suffering for the Lord?

Every god had its own particular temple. If the Christians were willing to take Jesus and put him alongside all of these other gods, and build a temple to him, there was no problem. The Smyrna Christians would not put Jesus with any other gods because there were no other gods as far as they were concerned, except the god man, Jesus Christ.

Smyrna was the center of Caesar worship and all the eastern part of the roman empire. With every other god, you enjoyed freedom of religion. You could choose to worship Aphrodite, or you could choose not to. You could choose to worship Mercury or choose not to. But everyone had to participate in the worship of Caesar. Everyone had to proclaim that Caesar was lord.

The roman empire was a polyglot. That is, it was made up of every kind of city, language, race, and nationality that you could imagine. The emperors unified the roman government and the roman people by demanding loyalty to the government and the worship of Caesar.

Once a year you would come to the temple of the emperor, you would walk by a little urn. Take a pinch of incense and burn it in the temple dedicated to Caesar. Say two words: kaiser curios, "Caesar is lord."

If these Smyrna Christians had just been willing to do that little thing, they would have been accepted and loved throughout all of the city. But these Christians were brought forward, they would stand there with backs erect, lips that were firm, and they would say, "No, we will not say kaiser curios, but rather we could only say Christos curios, 'Christ is lord.' No matter what they tried to do to these Christians they would not utter those words 'Caesar is lord.'"

- The Problem Of Poverty

"I know your works, your tribulation, your poverty." Revelation 2:9

This church was a poor church. There are two words in the Greek language for the word poor or poverty. One word means, just barely to get by or just barely to make it. The other Greek word is penes. It is used more through the New Testament and it means the working poor. It means to live paycheck to paycheck. Penes means you have a job, but you're just barely getting by. It means you're poor, but you can work.

Jesus said, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*" Matthew 5:3

Jesus uses a Greek word here that's very rarely used "ptóchos" and it means destitute. It's the word that he uses in Revelation 2 when he says, "*I know your poverty*" your ptócheia.

Ptóchos means the begging poor, the disabled, maimed, lame, disfigured, and the only way they get by is begging. They literally cannot work, and there was no welfare or social security or charitable services.

Some of these people would sit in darkness because of the way they were disfigured and put a cup out, and if someone didn't put something in the cup, they didn't eat. This is the word he uses, and he says, "Blessed are those who are poor in spirit"

When it comes to salvation, you are not the working poor. You can't earn one day in heaven. You are spiritually crippled, maimed, lame, and disfigured, and you can just barely put a cup out and if Jesus doesn't have mercy on you, you will not make it to heaven.

The word used here means absolute and utter destitution. It means to have absolutely nothing. If you had gone to this church, it would not have been air-conditioned, there would have been no carpet on the floor, no pads in the pews, no chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. There would have been no organ, no piano. They would not have had a big budget, in fact, they would not have even had a budget, it was a very poor church.

In such a rich well-to-do city, why was this church so very poor?

The economic life of Smyrna was built around the various gods and goddesses. Every man that worked belonged to a guild, a labor union. Every guild had a certain patron god, or goddess, that they were devoted to. And the only way you could get into one of these guilds and work and make a living was to believe and worship in their particular god. If you didn't worship one of these gods, you could not get into a labor union, and if you could not get into a labor union, you could not have a job. And if you could not get a job, you couldn't buy or sell. And if you couldn't buy or sell, you could not eat.

- The Problem Of Profanity

"And I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews, and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan."
Revelation 2:9

The word blasphemy comes from the Greek word blasphemies. Blasphemy usually refers to words spoken against God. The word means "slander." it refers to the lies and to the false malicious things that were being said by these false Jews about these Christian people at the Smyrna church.

Now notice these were people who said they were Jews, but they were actually of the synagogue of Satan. If you stand up for Jesus you're going to be slandered for Jesus. It will sometimes amaze you the people who will stand up against you.

They are going to slander you. They are going to say false things about you. And these people are in the synagogue of Satan. They are the devil's crowd. The Greek word for devil is diabolos. We get the word diabolic from that, it means to slander, to criticize, to speak negatively about someone else.

"Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for my sake, rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven." Matthew 5:11-12

- The Problem Of Prison

"The devil is about to throw some of you into prison." Revelation 2:10

Paul wrote half of the New Testament while he was in prison. John Bunyan wrote one of the greatest books ever written while he was in prison. Alexander Solzhenitsyn met the Lord Jesus Christ while he was languishing in a Russian prison.

The daughter of William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, was once thrown into prison in Switzerland for standing for the Lord Jesus, and while she was there, she wrote these words:

“Best beloved of my soul I am here alone with thee; in my prison is a heaven since you share it now with me.”

2. The Prosperity In The Church

In spite of all of these problems, Jesus reminds them *"but you are rich."* Revelation 2:9

The word for rich is the word from which we get our English word plutocrat. He says, "On the outside you may appear to be poor, but you are truly spiritual plutocrats." This church appeared to be poor externally, but internally and externally it was rich. Jesus was reminding this church, as we need to be reminded, that the riches of a church are not found in buildings or budgets. They are not seen in padded pews or polished preachers. The riches and wealth of a church can only be determined by its loyalty and love for the Lord Jesus Christ.

This church at Smyrna was exactly the opposite of the church at Laodicea. The church at Laodicea was rich in men's eyes but poor in God's eyes. But the church at Smyrna was poor in men's eyes and rich in God's eyes. The church at Smyrna was the poor little rich church. While the church at Laodicea was the rich little poor church.

There is a story of how the pope and Thomas Aquinas were going through a beautiful cathedral one time and the pope was showing Thomas Aquinas all of the beautiful possessions of the church. He said, "Thomas, no longer does the church have to say, silver and gold have I none," Thomas Aquinas looked at him with a sad face and said, "yes, but no longer can the church say, "rise up, and take up thy bed and walk."

- They Were Rich In Worship

They were an exciting church. They were happy and joyful in Jesus they were giving Jesus their very best.

They were a church of conviction and not compromise.

They were a church of loyalty and not luxury.

They were a church of commitment, not convenience.

And their suffering did not make them bitter. It made them better. The fires of persecution simply made their love for the cause of Christ greater. Poverty made them hungrier for the righteousness of God. The sound of profanity made them more determined to hear the word of God. The bars of prison simply freed them to share the glory of Jesus.

- They Were Rich In Works

They were working and ministering for the Lord Jesus Christ. Out of their poverty, they were sharing with those who were even poorer than they were. They were ministering to the down-and-out. They were witnessing to the up-and-out, and they were a testimony to the all-and-out.

- They Were Rich In Witness

You think about what a testimony and witness they had for the Lord Jesus. They were the laughingstock, the doormat, and the whipping post of the city, yet they just kept on smiling and shining for God. They would still tell anyone who was willing to listen, that Jesus saves.

Jesus had conducted a spiritual audit of this church and he said, "You are rich. You are in good shape. Continue in your faithfulness. If the Lord Jesus did a spiritual audit of our church, would we be rich, or would we be poor?"

3. The Promise To The Church

Jesus closes with a promise to this church. His promise is directly related to the suffering of this church. You know Jesus is always aware when we suffer. He understands our heartaches and our headaches.

- The Reason For Suffering

Though we may not always understand it and see it, there is always a reason and a purpose for suffering.

"Do not fear any of these things which you are about to suffer, for it is that you may be tested." Revelation 2:10

God always has a goal in suffering, and it is to test you. That word test means "to refine." It means to separate the dross from the gold, it means to mature and mold.

Jesus says that this church will have tribulation for *"ten days."* Revelation 2:10

They threw Christians into prison for 10 days, they tortured them for 10 days to get them to deny Christ and swear allegiance to the emperor, and if they did not deny Christ after 10 days, they killed them. Jesus is trying to prepare some of them you're about to go through the greatest testing of your life.

The number 10 represents human completeness, our hands have ten fingers. Our feet have ten toes. All of the laws in the Old Testament can be summed up in ten commandments. The number 10 is the number of fullness or completeness, so the point that Jesus is making here is, that there is a completeness, a fullness, and a limit to the suffering of God's people. You will only suffer, he says, for ten days, not for ten literal days, but for a certain period of time.

God is absolutely sovereign over suffering. He is in control. The Bible makes it plain that God will never allow us to suffer beyond what we can bear. And if the breaking point ever comes, God will cut off the suffering.

- The Reward Of Suffering

Now Jesus wrote this letter "to the angel of the church in Smyrna." (Revelation 2:8) The word angel means "messenger" and it refers to the pastor of the church. That is very significant. The pastor of the church at Smyrna was a man by the name of Polycarp. He was a contemporary of the apostle John. When he was 86 years old, he was brought before the emperor for the purpose of worshipping Caesar and denying the Lord Jesus Christ.

The emperor said to Polycarp, "Say, 'Caesar is lord' and deny Christ, and we will set you free." Every saint in the church was watching what their pastor was going to say and do.

Polycarp, that 86-year-old giant of a man, looked the emperor straight in the eye and said, "eighty and six years have I served him, and he has never wronged me. How then can I blaspheme my king who has saved me?" they were so infuriated at Polycarp that right then they gathered wood for the fire so they could burn him at the stake. They came to him with chains and ropes to bind him to the pole, and he said, "you will have no need of these things. You do not need to tie me to the pole. My God will protect me and enable me to go through the fire."

As those flames began to lick at his feet and work their way up his body he would not die. Three historians of the day wrote that he would not burn, and he continued to preach. Someone took a spear and ran up and stabbed

him in the heart. And that's how he was martyred, not from the fire, but from bleeding out. It went around that he shed his blood as Christ did for the gospel. Jesus says to be faithful unto death.

Polycarp's last words were these, "I thank thee that thou has graciously thought me worthy of this day and of this hour, that I may receive a portion in the number of thy martyrs in the cup of my Christ."

"Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life." Revelation 2:10

- They were fearless.

"Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer." Revelation 2:10

The only thing that a Smyrna Christian fears is displeasing the Lord Jesus Christ.

"In God I have put my trust; I will not fear what flesh can do to me." Psalm 56:4

- They were faithful.

The root word for faithful means, "to be convinced." In Revelation 1:5 we are told that Christ is the *"faithful witness."* Jesus was not saying here, "keep a stiff upper lip" or "keep your chin up" or even "grin and bear it." What he was saying was, you be faithful unto me because you can rest assured that I will be faithful unto you.

"I will give you the crown of life." Revelation 2:10

The crown of life is spoken of several times in scripture. There are two Greek words for crown. Many Greek words have a military background, and many Greek words have an athletic background. This word has an athletic background. One is diadem and it's a crown made for royalty. This is not that. This is the Greek word, stephanos, which is a wreath given to the athlete who's won the race.

Paul uses the same Greek word in 2 Timothy 4:7-8, *"I fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I've kept the faith. Finally, there's laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge will give me on that day and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing."*

"Whoever has ears, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Revelation 2:11

"Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever." Hebrews 13:8

He was faithful yesterday, he's faithful today, and he'll be faithful tomorrow.

"The one who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death." Revelation 2:12