

Smyrna -- A Church Committed

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[0 : 00] Good, well let's turn now to our Bible reading and we're in the book of Revelation and we began to look last time at the seven letters to the churches and we're going to be focusing this morning on the second of those letters in chapter 2, but I'm going to begin our reading back in chapter 1.

So turn to Revelation chapter 1 and reading from verse 9. Revelation chapter 1 and beginning there verse 9.

I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

I was in the spirit on the Lord's day and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamon and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and Laodicea.

Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest.

[1 : 35] The hairs of his head were white like white wool like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze refined in a furnace and his voice was like the roar of many waters.

In his right hand he held seven stars. From his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.

But he laid his right hand on me saying, fear not, I am the first and the last and the living one. I died and behold, I am alive forevermore and I have the keys of death and Hades.

Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are yet to take place after this. As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

And look down to verse eight, the second letter we're going to think about this morning. And to the angel of the church in Smyrna, write, the words of the first and the last who died and came to life.

[3 : 05] I know your tribulation and your poverty, but you are rich and the slander of those who say they are Jews, but are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

Do not fear what you're about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison that you may be tested.

And for 10 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. Amen. May God bless his words this morning.

Well, please have Revelation chapter two open there in front of you. And we're looking at those verses there, that second letter, verses eight to 11, the letter to Smyrna.

[4 : 16] Now, this letter that was written to the church in Smyrna was most likely written about 90 AD. And fast forward 60 years from the date of this letter, and we find ourselves in about 164 AD.

So within six decades of this letter to Smyrna. And if you were to be in Smyrna in that year, you would have seen the Bishop of Smyrna, a man called Polycarp.

He was a prisoner under the Roman authorities, and he was brought before the Roman proconsul in chains. And the proconsul uttered these words, encouraging Polycarp to deny Christ.

He said, swear, and I will set you at liberty. Reproach Christ. Deny Christ and I will let you go. What would Polycarp do?

He's the Bishop of Smyrna. He's a man in his mid-80s at this point. He was a disciple of John, the man who wrote Revelation. What would he do?

[5 : 33] Likely, he would have heard these very words from Revelation chapter two read in the church. He would have been a man in his early 20s at this point. When this letter first arrived, he would have heard it read.

Perhaps he even read them out himself. Words from the Lord Jesus, urging the church there in Smyrna, verse 10, to be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Those were Jesus' words to a young Polycarp. And with these words no doubt etched in his mind, Polycarp answered the Roman proconsul with these words.

He said, eighty and six years have I served Christ, and he never did me any injury. How then can I blaspheme my King and Saviour?

And with that refusal to reproach Christ, Polycarp was executed by public burning, having been faithful to the end, and being certain of the promised crown of life from his Lord and Saviour.

[6 : 46] Polycarp was a real and living example, not only of the reality of Christian suffering, but also the fruit of this letter we have in front of us.

Polycarp is the fruit of Revelation chapter 2, verses 8 to 11. He lived out these words almost six decades later. He obeyed the word of his Saviour.

He was faithful unto death. So what was it that enabled Polycarp and countless others before him and since to remain faithful unto death?

What enabled him in front of the Roman proconsul, him on the threat of death, urged him to deny Christ? What enabled him to stand there and refuse to do so? Was he superhuman?

Was he predisposed to bravery? Well, it's tempting to put people like Polycarp, isn't it, on an unattainable pedestal, so that mere mortals like you and I could never do that.

[7 : 53] This sort of faithfulness is beyond me. But I think that's the wrong inference to draw. I don't know about you, but some of the bravest, most courageous Christians I've ever met are very ordinary indeed.

They're not the sort of folk you'd naturally think would be brave and courageous. I can think of pastors I've met in India. You wouldn't think twice walking past them in the street.

But the things they've faced, the courage they've exuded under the most intensive pressure, they're just normal people like you and I.

And it can be easy to forget, can't it? As folk who've grown up and lived in unprecedented peace and stability, we live in a country where for centuries the values of Christianity have imbued every aspect of life.

It can be easy to forget that suffering is actually normal for Christians. Throughout history, that is the norm.

[9 : 02] What Polycarp experienced here is pretty much the norm for Christians across the globe all through time. We've lived in a very unusual period here in the West. And Jesus calls his church, doesn't he, to take up our cross every day.

Today, suffering comes sooner or later to those who identify with Christ. He himself suffered to the point of death. And he calls those who follow him to that same pattern.

So what is it that enables ordinary Christians, people like you and me, people like Polycarp, to be faithful unto death?

Well, let's allow this letter to the church in Smyrna to speak to us, to teach us, to train us, so that even we would be faithful unto death.

So two key points from this letter this morning. First, Jesus knows the suffering of his church. Verse 9. We see there in verse 9 that Jesus knows.

[10 : 08] He knows the suffering his church endures. He knows the nature of their suffering. Look at what it says there. I know your tribulation and your poverty and the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

The very fact that Jesus knows brings comfort to those who suffer, doesn't it? He knows. He sees everything. But he sees not just what was visible and experienced by the church in Smyrna.

He sees more. And what he sees brings true perspective to the church there in Smyrna. He sees their poverty, yes, but in reality they are rich.

He sees the slander. But he sees the real source behind the slander. He unveils where that slander is really coming from.

And three things particularly he sees. Three specific things about the nature of the suffering there in Smyrna. Tribulation, poverty, and slander. Those are the three things he mentions.

[11:16] So firstly there's the tribulation. I know your tribulation, says Jesus. He sees their affliction. And the word here, tribulation, refers to all sorts of troubles and hardships that the church may have been suffering in Smyrna.

And it would have been plentiful. You see, Smyrna was a city hostile to Christians, particularly because Smyrna had a very strong allegiance to Rome.

It was deeply connected with Rome. It was the first city in the ancient world to build a temple in the honor of the goddess Roma in about 200 BC.

So 300 years before this letter, or before Polycarp was stood there, 300 years before they had built this huge temple to the goddess of Roma.

It then built another temple to the great emperor Tiberius. It was a city known for its allegiance to Rome. And strong links to Rome and to the imperial cult would have made life very difficult for the Christians there in Smyrna.

[12:28] I'm just going to wait a minute. So those links to Rome would have made it very difficult for Christians there.

And Jesus sees their tribulation. He knows what they face as Christians living in a city with its allegiance to Rome, not to Christ.

He also sees their poverty. That's the second thing he says there in verse 9. I see your poverty. And likely that was due to the general hostility they encountered in the city.

The very fact they were Christians and known as such would have made life particularly difficult.

Participation in the trade guilds that were the hub of economic life in the city would have been very difficult.

One commentator makes the point that people living in Smyrna could aspire to economic prosperity and greater social standing only by participating in some degree to the Roman cult.

[13:31] You had to subscribe to the great cult of Rome if you wanted to get anywhere in the city. And we see something of that, don't we, in our own society. The pressure to bow the knee to the cult of identity, the idolatry of self, to proclaim allegiance to the ever-changing pride flag.

And so Christians in Smyrna, Christians today, find themselves cut off from key networks in the city's economy and are consigned, well, here to poverty.

They'd be barely able to make ends meet. Their businesses would lose credibility as their Christian faith became more widely known. And so these dear Christians of Smyrna are facing greater difficulties, material poverty.

But the Lord sees that. He knows it. He sees their poverty. But notice there in verse 9, in the brackets, He says, But you are rich.

I see your poverty. But you are rich. Jesus sees the greater reality. And He tells them. They may seem poor, and they certainly are from a material, earthly perspective.

[14:54] But in another sense, these dear Christians of Smyrna are very rich indeed. Quite the contrast to the church in Laodicea.

Just look over the page to chapter 3, verse 17. And Laodicea is one of the churches that is in for real criticism from the Lord Jesus. And notice what He says there in verse 17 of chapter 3.

For you say, I am rich. I have prospered. And I need nothing. Not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

That's the church in Laodicea. But in Smyrna, Jesus says the opposite. You are rich. You see, there is a wealth that is of no ultimate value at all.

And there is a wealth, often hidden from the eyes of this world, a wealth that can't be seen on your bank statement, a wealth that really does count. And that's the wealth that Jesus sees here in the church in Smyrna.

[16:00] This is the wealth that Smyrna had and Laodicea lacked. And economic privation in the order known by the Smyrna Christians is not something we in the West have fully experienced yet, is it?

To be poor as a direct result of being an unashamed Christian that is alien to most of us. But maybe not for long. Certain jobs, certain positions, certain careers may not be open to Christians because

of particular views we hold, a refusal to compromise on certain things.

And when those days come, have these words etched into your minds. We may be poor in the world's eyes, but in Jesus' eyes, we are rich.

And that's a hard thing to think about, isn't it? It may not be possible for very much longer to be a middle-class member of society and be a Christian at the same time.

But even if we don't yet experience the sort of economic privation on the scale of Smyrna, there is a sense in which, as Christians, we don't enjoy fruits of wealth to the same degree we could do.

[17 : 23] If we weren't Christians, then we could enjoy more of what this world offers in terms of material prosperity. Maybe you know friends who maybe live off a similar income to you, but because their priorities are different, they enjoy those multiple foreign holidays every year.

They have the latest gadgets, the nicest cars. But you don't have those things because your priorities lie elsewhere. And it's hard, isn't it, to see people, peers, living the lifestyle you would like to live, but don't.

It's hard not to feel out, feel like we're missing out. It doesn't sometimes feel that as Christians, we are the most privileged people in the world because we belong to Christ.

It doesn't feel like that. It doesn't feel like we're rich. But Jesus says you are. If you're a Christian, you are rich. You see, there is a wealth that is of no ultimate value at all.

It remains here in this world once we go. But there is a wealth hidden from the eyes of this world, a wealth that can't be seen in your bank statement, a wealth that really counts.

[18 : 38] And that's the wealth the church in Smyrna had. Poor in the eyes of the world, but Jesus says you are rich. Tribulations, poverty, and also slander.

Look at the end of verse 9. The slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. The source of the slander is from those who identify as Jews.

But Jesus shows their true colors, regardless of the heritage they come from, through their fierce opposition to the church there, their slander of the Christians.

they are in reality a synagogue carrying out the bidding of the great enemy himself. He says they are a synagogue of Satan. Now the exact nature of the slander, we're not told.

But, in the case of Polycarp, which I was mentioning at the start, you can read about what happened to him. You can have a look on the internet and look at the account of the execution of Polycarp.

[19 : 46] It's clear there that those responsible for betraying him to the authorities were Jewish enemies there in Smyrna. You see, this Jewish opposition, it had persisted from the time of this letter through to Polycarp's execution.

There's a real opposition there in Smyrna from Jewish enemies. And slander is a great weapon in Satan's arsenal.

Slander intimidates, it demeans, it destroys reputations and it sticks, doesn't it? If you hear something about someone that's slanderous, it just sticks.

Even if you know the person, there's something about it you want to believe. Slander does that, doesn't it? People love to believe slander. Satan knows the effectiveness of slander to destroy a church, to destroy its witness, to discourage Christians, but know that Jesus sees the truth.

He saw right through these so-called Jewish people, he saw their true motivation, and he saw their true leader, he saw where this was really coming from. He saw it then and he sees it today.

[21 : 05] So when you are slandered because of your faith, when your church is slandered because of its faith, because of your own willingness to deny Christ, know what really lies behind that slander.

Know who really is behind those words designed to destroy. and know too that Satan, although a powerful enemy, he is a defeated enemy.

That's what Revelation is showing us all the way through. Satan is a defeated enemy. That's the great truth through the book of Revelation. Satan defeated, Christ reigning.

But slander is difficult. I remember back to my student days. This is a rather trivial example, but at the time it didn't feel too trivial. I was involved with the Christian Union, the CEU there at university, and foolishly, I agreed to an interview with the Student Union magazine, the student newspaper.

And I was told it was a wide-ranging interview with all the different faith groups around the campus. They wanted to see how we operated that kind of thing. But about one minute into the interview, I realized it was a bit of a setup and they were out to get me.

[22 : 19] And when the article was published, it was front page, the CEU newspaper, the student newspaper, and the title of the article was CEU in Hell.

It was quite a good title. It certainly caught the attention. But it was a pretty one-sided affair, as you can imagine, from the title. And they just took everything I said out of context. They made me look like an idiot.

The CEU looked like a ridiculous institution. It was just slander. It was poor journalism, but it was slanderous. Hours of meetings with the Student Union followed. They wanted to see what was really going on.

It was a real pain, a huge distraction to the work of the Christian Union there at university. Now that's just one example. That's a trivial example. But that sort of thing happens. The church, church leaders, Christians, face slander.

Such was the nature of the suffering there in Smyrna. Tribulation, poverty, slander.

[23 : 20] But note, the church in Smyrna had done nothing wrong. It's one of the two churches out of the seven that received no rebuke at all from the Lord Jesus.

The other five are rebuked. But this is one of the ones that is not. The Lord Jesus commends them. He doesn't rebuke them. They suffer because they're doing things right.

And that's hard to take, isn't it? We expect life to go smoothly when we're honoring Christ. We expect life to go straightforwardly because we're following the laws. But there is the pattern for all who follow Christ.

And we should expect it. If not now, then one day we ought to expect some sort of pushback and opposition as we stand for Christ. For Polycarp, it was six decades down the line from when he first heard these words.

Sixty years later. But he had absorbed the teaching of verse 9. And so should we. Know that Jesus knows.

[24 : 31] He sees. And he sees more than we can observe with our eyes. He sees what's really going on. There is a reality behind what we can see. And Jesus knows.

He sees. And the very fact that Jesus knows brings comfort to those who suffer, doesn't it? He sees and knows your hardships and sufferings.

And perhaps you are here facing hardships and sufferings. Uncertainties. Illness. Difficult family situations. Work stresses.

Maybe things that are a result of your Christian faith. You are facing opposition and suffering. You are facing difficult things at work.

Well, know that Jesus sees. He knows. He knows your broken heart in a way that nobody else does. He knows the fears in your heart that you dare not express to anybody else.

[25 : 35] He knows. But Jesus doesn't just observe the suffering in the church. He doesn't just know about it. He equips the church to face it.

This is our second point. Secondly, Jesus strengthens his church for suffering to come. He knows it, yes, but he strengthens the church to face it.

Verses 10 and 11. Jesus is very frank here, isn't he? There is no sugar coating. He doesn't gloss over things, no.

Jesus is realistic and honest about what he calls his people to. He is realistic and honest about the costiness of following him. Yes, his church has suffered.

But notice what he says. Verse 10, 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 10 days you will have tribulation.

[26 : 39] Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life. He says, do not fear what you are about to suffer.

And there are two things on the horizon for the church in Smyrna, prison and death. So firstly, prison. Behold, he says, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison that you may be tested and for 10 days you will have tribulation.

who is the person behind it? Again, Jesus reveals the reality. Who's behind their persecution and opposition? Well, it's the devil. He's the one who's behind it.

The devil is about to throw you into prison. It may look like the Roman authorities but in reality it's the great enemy himself. He's the one behind it.

But even as that is the case it is not beyond the scope of God's sovereignty. There is a purpose behind it. Look at verse 10. So that you may be tested.

[27 : 50] When under trial the genuineness of faith is exposed, isn't it? It's tested. When pressure comes the apostle Peter in his first letter wrote these words.

You have been grieved by various trials so that the tested genuineness of your faith may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Christ. It is in the heat of trial that our faith will be truly tested and will truly shine forth. It's in the heat of it, not before it, not in theory.

It's in the reality of it. I don't know about you but I sometimes kind of imagine certain scenarios. How would I cope if that happened?

What would I do if that happened to me and my family? What would happen if this happened to the church? But you see the Lord doesn't equip us for theoretical situations but actual ones.

[28 : 59] It's in those moments, in the midst of them, when trials and sufferings come, that is when the testing comes. And that is when Jesus will be alongside us, helping us and strengthening us.

And so we pray that God would strengthen us and equip us for those moments that we would not fear but rather be trusting in him. Jesus said something about those sorts of situations, didn't he? He told his disciples not to worry about what they would say in that day. Jesus says he will give us the words. When the moment comes, over coffee, in the workplace, even the courtroom, we have to trust that Jesus will give us the words and the courage to say them.

There's no good being fearful now, imagining some situation, but in the moment, when the pressure comes, Jesus will be there. He will enable us, as he did with Polycarp, to stand firm.

So Jesus reveals the real person behind the suffering to come. He reveals the purpose. It's there to test. And he reveals that it's not forever.

[30 : 16] It is not in perpetuity. Rather, it's a limited suffering. Look at what he says in the middle of verse 10. For 10 days, you will have tribulation. Now, whether that's 10 literal days, or to be taken symbolically as a period of time, either way, it's limited.

This isn't going to go on forever. However, either you'll be released, or you will be killed. Either way, it is not forever.

So prison is one thing on the horizon. The other is death. That's the second thing on the horizon for some of the Christians there in Smyrna. Look at the end of verse 10.

It says, be faithful unto death. death, and I will give you the crown of life. That's the second imperative that Jesus gives to his church.

He gives two instructions. The first is do not fear, and the second is be faithful unto death. Do not fear, be faithful unto death. And as with all the commands of the Lord, there is a great promise attached to it.

[31 : 33] Be faithful, and I will give you the crown of life. He doesn't just say be faithful. He says, be faithful, and I will give you the crown of life. There's always a promise attached to his commands.

The reward for enduring death is life. Everlasting life. Life with the God in the new creation. That is what is beyond death for us in this world.

Death is not the end. death. The believers there were not to look at the suffering to come so that they trembled with fear, but rather they were to look through the suffering to come and beyond it to the Lord who promised to deliver them.

That is what conquering would look like for this particular church. Look at verse 11. judgment, the one who conquers, will not be hurt by the second death.

That is to say that though they may endure terrible suffering, and even death in this world, they will not be touched by a far more terrible and everlasting judgment that will come.

[32 : 44] You see, we know that death is not the end because all people will face judgment one day. And that is the thing to fear. Not death in this world, but the judgment to come.

The Lord Jesus said elsewhere, do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

It is the second death we ought to fear and prepare for, says Jesus. And by second death he means that day of judgment.

And Christ will judge all. And that is the perspective that Jesus pressed upon his church in Smyrna. And for all who today face persecution and even death for their faith in him, this is the perspective he urges upon us.

To the one who conquers, we will not be hurt by the second death. death. And the fact that guarantees that promise is that the Lord Jesus who makes this promise is the one in verse 8 who is the first and the last.

[34 : 00] The one who is dead and is now alive. Jesus has overcome death. He rose again. He lives forever. That is why this promise is a sure and certain promise.

that is why he can make it. Even if you die for your faith, listen to the one who died and came to life. And that very fact that we belong to a risen Lord Jesus, that very fact, in addition to these words of life, give the church then and the day great hope, great comfort in the face of suffering.

Jesus not only knows the suffering of his church, he's faced it himself. He has suffered himself. He has faced tribulation and poverty and slander. He has faced death, but death could not hold him. He has overcome it. He is the first fruits of the new creation, the first one resurrected from the dead, the one whose resurrection guarantees us. All who are his have this certain hope of everlasting life.

[35 : 16] And so Jesus tenderly encourages his church. He encourages you in the face of terrible trials. Do not fear what is to come.

Be faithful unto death and he will give you the crown of life. That is Jesus' promise to his suffering church. church. Let me finish with three observations, three implications for the church today.

First, there's always more going on than we can see. That's something we've bumped into again and again in this brief passage. We see things going on from a human perspective.

We see poverty, we see slander, we see death, imprisonment. But Jesus gives us another perspective entirely. Yes, you may be poor, but in reality you are rich.

Yes, you are being slandered by these people, but in reality it is my defeated enemy who's doing it. Satan's doing it, but he is defeated. Yes, you'll be put in prison, but it's the enemy who's done that.

[36 : 30] Yes, you may die, but I will give you everlasting life. And that is something we must get firmly screwed into our minds, isn't it?

There is more to life than we can see. There is one on the throne who has risen from the dead and he guarantees everlasting life for all who are his.

There is always more going on than we can see. Jesus sees the big picture. He sees everything. We see almost nothing. He sees the whole thing, so trust him. That's the first thing.

There's always more going on than we can see. Second, Jesus hasn't lost control if and when we suffer. Because there's always more going on than we can see, persecution does not mean that Jesus has lost control of the situation.

Suffering is one of the few things Jesus promises us, isn't it? He says, whoever does not bear his laying cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.

[37 : 34] Suffering for Christ is part of the Christian life. But the Lord Jesus who knows all and who is in control of all, he says to you, fear not.

Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life. So there's always more going on than we can see. Jesus is in control and conquering means living by Jesus' words and not by sight.

We live by what Jesus says and not what we see. Jesus is risen and ascended. That's the great reality. That's the great hope of the gospel, isn't it?

But if we're honest, it doesn't much look like it. It doesn't look like it to us as we look around the world, as we look around our city. It doesn't look like Jesus has risen and ascended.

But that is why he gives us this book. That is why he has given us revelation. It is a glimpse of a reality we cannot see. Jesus lifts the curtain on the seen world and shows us what's really going on.

[38 : 41] And we're called to live by his words, not what we see. It doesn't look like Jesus has risen and ascended. It doesn't look like Christians are the most privileged people in the world.

It doesn't look like Christians will be given a crown of life beyond death. But we're to live not by what we see, but by Jesus' words.

We fix our ears on what Jesus says. We fix our eyes on the unseen crown of life. We live by faith, faithful unto death, and he will give us the crown of life.

That is the perspective we need. And all the time, our perspective has been driven down, isn't it, to this world, what we can see. But Jesus forces our horizon up.

Listen to these words. Let me finish with this. These are words from that account of the martyrdom of Polycarp. And it's just marking out the date and the time of his death.

[39 : 48] But listen to what it says. Now, the blessed Polycarp was martyred on the second day of the first part of the month Zacanthus, seven days before the calends of March, on a great Sabbath,

about two o'clock in the afternoon.

He was arrested by Herod when Philip of Trellis was high priest during the proconsulorship of Stadius Quadratus. But while Jesus Christ was reigning as king forever, to him be the glory and honor and majesty and eternal throne from generation to generation.

Amen. Now that's perspective, isn't it? Yes. So and so is high priest. So and so is governor. But Jesus reigns.

Forever. He was on the throne then. He's on the throne now. He'll be on the throne forever. He reigns forever. And in him, we do not fear the second death.

Let me pray. Father God, we thank you.

[41 : 03] That the Lord Jesus is on the throne. How we need to hear that reality, how we need that reality to be burnt into our hearts.

Because you know the things that cause us to fear. You know the things we see and read and are fearful about. Please reassure each one of our hearts this morning that you know our sufferings.

You know the hardships we will face. But help us to trust in Jesus. The one who sits on the throne.

The one who can give the gift of everlasting life.

Please help us to be a people living not by sight. But by faith. Help us in Jesus name. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.