

Main Idea: According to Jesus' words to the church at Smyrna in Revelation 2:8-11, there are four things the persecuted church needs to know.

- I. We have a Savior (8).
 - A. He is permanent.
 - B. He is powerful.
- II. We will face suffering (9).
 - A. It comes in various forms.
 1. God's people experience tribulation.
 2. God's people experience poverty.
 3. God's people experience slander.
 - B. It comes from a violent enemy.
 1. There were individuals with false claims.
 2. There were individuals who made a fatal choice.
- III. We have strength (10).
 - A. Don't fear.
 - B. Face the truth.
 1. We will be attacked by the devil.
 2. We will be tested.
 3. We will have tribulation.
 - C. Be faithful.
- IV. We have security (11).
 - A. Everyone dies once.
 - B. Those who know Christ die only once.
 - C. Those who don't know Christ will die twice.

The Bottom Line: Are we ready to suffer for Christ?

Today is the **International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church**. Today we are joining our brothers and sisters worldwide in order to pray for our forever family members who are suffering persecution.

Why such a day? Because every day of every week, in at least 60 countries, people are persecuted because they are followers of Jesus Christ. Estimates say 100,000 are being killed each year. That's our family, beloved, dying at a rate of 274 martyrs a day, 11 martyrs an hour, 1 martyr every 5 minutes.

Did you realize that nearly two thousand years ago the Lord Jesus Himself sent a letter to a persecuted church? He did, and I want us to give careful attention to what He said in it.

It's the letter to the church at Smyrna in Revelation 2. The Lord, of course, directed John the apostle to record *seven* letters to churches in Asia Minor. This is the second letter.

The church at Smyrna was a church that Christ commended. In fact, it's one of only two of the seven churches that the Lord did not rebuke for something. It was also a church that knew firsthand about suffering, specifically the suffering of persecution.

You say, “Do you think we'll ever face persecution in our country?” It sure seems like we're heading in that direction.

A few weeks ago, Al Mohler, president of Southern Seminary, delivered an address at Brigham Young University, “entitled, “A Clear and Present Danger: Religious Liberty, Marriage, and the Family in the Late Modern Age.” In his address, which I

^{**}Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For an earlier treatment of this text, see the series on the “Letters to the Seven Churches in Revelation 2-3” preached at WBC in 2005.

recommend you read, Dr. Mohler offered this conclusion, “I do not believe that we are going to heaven together, but I do believe we may go to jail together.” He said that because of the mutual commitment Mormons and evangelicals have when it comes to the traditional family, and society’s increasing intolerance for that view.

But it’s not just what we believe about the family. Fundamentally, it’s what we believe about Jesus who said, “He is the way, the truth, and the life.” That’s a bold claim, and unpopular to the all roads lead to heaven crowd.

So we need this message, so we can understand what our brothers are facing around the world, and so we can prepare for what’s coming. According to Jesus' words to the church at Smyrna in Revelation 2:8-11, there are four things the persecuted church needs to know.

I. We have a Savior (8).

Jesus speaks in verse 8, “To the angel (either the “messenger,” “Pastor,” or “prevailing spirit in the church”) of the church in Smyrna write.” Each of the seven letters begins with a different description of Christ. To the Ephesians, Christ revealed Himself as the One who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands. This imagery reveals two attributes of Christ. He is strong, and He is sovereign. In the letter to the church at Smyrna, two characteristics are likewise highlighted.

A. He is permanent.

Verse 8—“These are the words of him who is the First and the Last (lit. *eschatos*).” Jesus Christ is the First--He was there at the first act of creation, and He is the last--He will be there when the new creation is established. By Him were all things created (Col 1:16). He is before all things (Col 1:17). And He is the One who said this in the final chapter of the Bible, "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last (Rev 22:13)." Jesus Christ is eternal. He is permanent.

B. He is powerful.

How powerful? Listen to what is said of Jesus in verse 8, “Who died and came to life again” [KJV "Who was dead, and is alive"]. Think of what that meant to a church facing the threat of death! Jesus Himself encountered death, but conquered death and is alive!

The Christians at Smyrna needed this reminder about Who their Savior is. He is permanent. In a changing world, it's great to know One who does not change. And He is powerful. Death is a defeated foe to Him, and so too, to His followers.

Here's the key to stability in life. Stable people are those who know they have a Savior, Jesus the Christ, and then grasp that their Savior is permanent and powerful.

II. We will face suffering (9).

When you study these seven letters, a couple of things stand out. One, each of the seven churches are different. They are at different levels of maturity and effectiveness. And two, God does not allow all the churches to face the same challenges. Namely, all churches face suffering, but the church at Smyrna encountered more intense persecution. Jesus said in verse 8, “I know your afflictions and your poverty [KJV "I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty"]—yet you are rich.”

A little background will help us to understand. Of all the cities in Asia, it has been said the Smyrna was the loveliest.² The city remains today called Izmir. In the first century, it was called the ornament of Asia. It was located 35 miles north of Ephesus on the Aegean Sea. It was truly a model city. It boasted a famous stadium, library, and the largest public theater in Asia. More than 200,000 people lived in Smyrna in New Testament times. It was known as the birthplace of Homer, was a very wealthy city, and a place where learning flourished, especially in the sciences and medicine.³

It was tough to live as a Christian in Smyrna. Why? For two main reasons. For one, there was a large Jewish population in the city which was actively hostile to followers of Christ. A second reason was that Smyrna was intensely loyal to Rome. In fact, Smyrna was known for its emperor worship, and in A.D. 23, the Roman senate granted Smyrna the honor of building the first temple in honor of Emperor Tiberius. By the end of the first century, under Domitian, emperor worship became compulsory for every Roman citizen on threat of death. Once a year a citizen had to burn incense on the altar to the godhead of Caesar, and afterwards was issued a certificate. Now you understand why it was tough to be a Christian in Smyrna.

Perhaps they wondered, "Does anyone know what we're going through? Does anyone see the hardships, the mistreatment we're enduring?" The answer came in verse 9, "I know..." "I know your afflictions and your poverty." The name "Smyrna" means "bitter" and is related to the word "myrrh." Christ commends the Christians there because their faithful testimony was like myrrh to Him.

In verse 9, we learn a couple of things about suffering.

A. It comes in various forms.

What did Christ know about the church at Smyrna? He knew they were experiencing suffering in three ways, as do God's people today.

1. God's people experience tribulation.

Must Christians face tribulation? Most certainly. Jesus is not talking here about THE tribulation period, but He is pointing out that His people are not immune from tribulation. The word means "affliction, crushing beneath a weight." It's the idea of "pressure." To the Smyrnans, He said, "I know the pressure you're under. I know."

2. God's people experience poverty.

Please note that living for Jesus affects your economic conditions—but not always the way the "health and wealth" preachers claim in our day. It can *cost* you to be a Christian.

In fact, in the New Testament, poverty and Christianity are closely connected. James says God has chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith (James 2:5). In the Greek, there are two words for poverty. The first describes the state of a man who has nothing extra. The second describes the state of a man who has nothing at all. It's the second word Jesus uses here, "I know your poverty." And yet, in the light of eternity, you are rich!

You say, "Why were these Christians so poor in a city so rich?" Simply put, because they wouldn't participate with the Romans' emperor worship. Quite likely, one of the consequences was economic sanctions. The choice to live for Christ cost them, literally.

² Barclay, 73

³ Johnson, 436

3. *God's people experience slander.*

Verse 9 reads, "I know the slander [KJV 'blasphemy'] of those who say they are Jews and are not." Apparently, one great source of the persecution against the Christians came from the religious community, namely zealous Jews. By the way, throughout church history, most severe persecution has come from religionists.⁴

What would you have done if you have lived in Smyrna at the end of the first century? Every year you would be faced with a choice. You would hear a knock at your door, and a Roman official would say to you, "If you are a good Roman citizen, declare your allegiance." The choice was simple. All you had to do was burn a pinch of incense and say these words, "Caesar is Lord." If you did, you were issued a certificate. If you refused, quite likely, you were executed. What would you do?

When the Japanese occupied Korea in 1937-40, Korean Christians faced such a choice. When they were ordered to worship at the Shinto shrines, many Christians refused and were imprisoned and tortured.⁵ They would acknowledge no Lord but Christ.

Who is Lord in your life? Is Caesar or Christ? Is your Lord your reputation in the community, or is it Christ? Is your bank account your Lord, or is Christ? Is living in comfort your Lord, or is Christ?

Know this. If we belong to Christ, we will face suffering. Maybe not as the Smyrnans did, for suffering comes in different forms, but we will suffer. Notice something else about it.

B. It comes from a violent enemy.

What did Jesus reveal about the antagonists who were afflicting His people? He underscored two characteristics of these individuals.

1. There were individuals with false claims.

They "say they are Jews and are not (9)." You mean a person can claim to be something he isn't? For sure. Paul put it this way in Romans 2:28-29, "A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code..."

The Jews in Smyrna did not have to patronize the imperial cult since their religion was accepted by Rome.⁶ But many of them were quick to slander Christians as being a heretical deviation from Judaism. Jesus revealed this shocking truth about these Jews. They were not Jews at all. Why not?

2. There were individuals who made a fatal choice.

A person who refuses to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah is no longer a true Jew at all. Who are they? Jesus' words are sobering. Verse 9—They "are a synagogue of Satan."

How ironic! A synagogue is supposed to be a place to learn about and worship God. A synagogue *of Satan*? The terms don't go together, do they? Actually, Satan is a very religious being. He uses religion. He loves religion.

Contrary to today's rhetoric, all roads *don't* lead to the same place. All religions are not equally valid. Satan actually manufactures and uses religion to deceive. And not just the obvious Satanic religions, like Wicca, occultism, and blatant Satan worship. He

⁴ *Bible Knowledge Commentary*

⁵ Johnson, 437

⁶ Wiersbe, 573

uses synagogues and even “churches,” too, where some truth is proclaimed and where some good is done, but where Christ and the cross are hidden.

Don't miss this. The ultimate source of persecution against Christians is Satan. Satan is mentioned in four of the seven letters. There was demonic, Satanic backing behind the persecution at Smyrna. We see it again in verse 10, “...*the devil* will put some of you in prison...” The devil attacked the church, but he did it through people who made a fatal choice. They rejected Christ, and opened themselves up to the bidding of the Evil One.

The question arises, "Can the church stand in the midst of such opposition?" The answer is, "We must and can." Why? Because of a third certainty. We have a Savior. We will face suffering. And...

III. We have strength (10).

In verse 10, Jesus gives the church a series of three admonitions, three commands, with a concluding promise. The fact that God never commands us to do something without also giving us the ability to do it highlights the strength that is available to us.

Verse 10—“Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.

What are the three commands a church under attack needs to heed?

A. Don't fear.

Jesus says [KJV], "Fear none of those things which you will suffer." Literally, the command is, "Stop being afraid." To put it positively, "Have courage." We need not be afraid of suffering. Suffering for Christ isn't bad. It's not a sign that we have done something wrong. Peter wrote in 1 Peter 2:21, “To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.”

I've shared before about Brother Yun, a Chinese pastor who was imprisoned and tortured for Christ who is now free and speaking in the west. Listen to his perspective of persecution:⁷

“I don't know exactly what the future holds, but I do know who holds my future! Since the Lord saved me as a teenager it has been an exciting ride! I've never known what was waiting around the next corner.

One day I may be killed for the sake of the gospel in a Muslim or Buddhist nation. If you hear this news, please don't grieve for me, but grieve for the millions of precious souls who are enslaved by Satan without any gospel witness. Death is not the end for the servant of God, but just the start of indescribable everlasting life in the presence of Jesus.

If you hear I have been called home to heaven, please go on in my place with the gospel, preaching and discipling the people groups of the world until Jesus comes again.”

Christians ought not be fearful. Not of wicked rulers, but not of other things either, like storms, job losses, the future of our retirement savings, and failing health. We shouldn't fear. Why not? Because we know the One who holds the future, *our* future. Can storms destroy our homes? Can we lose our jobs? Can our retirement plans go belly up? Can our health fail? Yes, but only if He wills it.

Know this. *Christ uses suffering to showcase His sufficiency.*

⁷ taken from *The Heavenly Man*, p. 347

So don't fear. Don't be afraid of people. Don't be afraid to stand up for Christ at work and at school and wherever.

B. Face the truth.

That's the idea behind the phrase, "I tell you." It's one word in the Greek text, translated in the KJV by the word, "Behold." Pay attention! Take note! Don't miss this. Face the truth. What is the truth? Christ reveals three inevitable events.

1. We will be attacked by the devil.

We are in a battle. We have armor (Eph 6). Don't be surprised by the devil's attack. "I tell you, the devil will put [KJV 'shall cast'] some of you in prison..." In the ancient world, imprisonment was not for rehabilitation, but was the prelude to death. A man was only a prisoner until he was led out to die.⁸ Prison was a place where you waited to be executed.

2. We will be tested.

Did you ever notice how many of God's greats spent time in prison? Joseph did. Jeremiah did. Paul did. Georgi Vins did. Countless Chinese believers are there even today, as are those in North Korea, Nigeria, and Iran. What is the purpose of prison for a believer? Verse 10 says, "To test you" [KJV 'That ye may be tried']. The word "tested" or "tried" means "to make proof of." When you're in prison, you face a test to find out who is number one in your life.

3. We will have tribulation.

For how long? Verse 10 again—"You will suffer persecution for ten days." Some believe that "ten days" refers to the ten different Roman rulers who made edicts to try to wipe out Christianity. Actually, the phrase "ten days" was used to point out that the persecution has a limit, that it would be for a "limited time" (like we would say, "a week or so"). Know that tribulation won't last forever for the Christian.

So don't fear. Face the truth. Furthermore...

C. Be faithful.

Verse 10—"Be faithful, even to the point of death [KJV 'even unto death'], and I will give you the crown of life." Apparently, none of the Smyrna believers had died as of yet. But they would. Why did Jesus tell them ahead of time all these "bad" things were coming? Because He wanted them to be what? Be prepared. Be faithful to the end.

That's what God asks of us. Not results, simply faithfulness. Be loyal to Him and keep doing what He calls us to do, no matter what.

He gave a promise to help. If you are faithful to the point of death, I will give you a crown of life.

Inhabitants of Smyrna knew all about crowns. They had games which were famous all over Asia. The winner in the games received the laurel crown.

The Bible mentions at least five crowns promised to faithful believers at the return of Christ. There is the incorruptible crown (1 Cor 9:25), the soul-winners crown (1 Thes 2:19), the crown of righteousness (2 Tim 4:8), the crown of glory (1 Pet 5:4), and the crown of life (see also James 1:12; Strauss, 46). William Barclay points out that the word "of" means "which consists of" (83). To win the crown of righteousness or glory or life is to be crowned with righteousness, glory, and life.

What's the point? It's this. When Christ says to his suffering servants, "Don't be afraid, face the truth, be faithful," He's not saying, "Keep your chin up! Keep smiling!"

⁸ Barclay, 79

It's not so bad." No. He is telling us it will be worth it all when we see Him. The Christians at Smyrna may have been poor temporarily, but they would be rich eternally.

Lehman Strauss rightly surmises (46), "The Christian philosophy of suffering for Christ is that out of tribulation comes triumph; out of persecution, the prize; out of death we come to reigning with Him." That's our strength. Which brings us to our fourth certainty.

IV. We have security (11).

Verse 11—"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." This is not intended to be a history lesson. Jesus' words weren't just for the believers in Smyrna, but for any who has an ear!

Verse 11 continues, "He who overcomes will not be [a double negative in the Greek] hurt at all by the second death." There are three non-negotiables emphasized in this verse, three things of which we can be absolutely sure.

A. Everyone dies once. Everyone. For some in Smyrna the time was at hand. Our day is coming, too. Everyone (unless Christ returns first) dies once.

B. Those who know Christ die only once. For the Christian to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. The Christian is not affected by the "second death." If you know Christ you will die *only once*. On the other hand...

C. Those who don't know Christ will die twice. First, a physical death, but then they will experience the second death. You say, "What's that?" Revelation 20:11-15 tells us:

"Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is *the second death*. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."

Yes, all of us (if our Lord tarries) will be affected by the first death. We can't avoid that. But we can escape the second death, the lake of fire. How? Jesus says, "He who *overcomes* will not be hurt by the second death." To avoid the second death you must be an "overcomer."

"How do I become an overcomer?" you ask. You must say "No" to the world and "Yes" to Christ. You must repent of living for self and trust in Christ. Those who do that are secure, eternally secure.

Brothers and sisters, we know four certainties. We have a *Savior*. True, we will have to *suffer* for our Savior, but we can do so because we have *strength* and *security*. These four certainties have mobilized the church for nearly 20 centuries. May we grasp them today and pray for those facing persecution today.

As did one particular man from Smyrna. His name was Polycarp. He was the pastor of the church in Smyrna not long after the Lord sent this letter to His church there.

Polycarp became a martyr for Christ on Saturday, February 23, A.D. 155. He was a man who stood true to the four certainties revealed in Jesus' letter.⁹

His death occurred in this fashion. It was the time of the public games in Smyrna. The city was crowded and the crowd was fired up. Someone shouted, "Away with the atheists. Let Polycarp be searched for." The search began. A slave collapsed under torture and revealed the whereabouts of Polycarp. When they arrived to arrest him, Polycarp ordered that they all be given a meal, and he himself requested the privilege of one last hour in prayer.

Then he was taken to the arena. The proconsul gave Polycarp the following choice: either curse the name of Christ and make sacrifice to Caesar, or die. Here's how this man of God replied:

Eighty and six years have I served him, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"

The proconsul threatened him with burning, to which the bishop returned:

You threaten me with the fire that burns for a time, and is quickly quenched, for you do not know the fire which awaits the wicked in the judgment to come and in everlasting punishment. Why are you waiting? Come, do what you will.

So the crowds came with fury to burn him alive. When they attempted to bind him to the stake, he said, "Leave me as I am, for he who gives me power to endure the fire, will grant me to remain in the flames unmoved even without the security you will give by the nails." So they left him loosely bound in the flames. And in his final moments, Polycarp prayed this prayer:

"O Lord God Almighty, Father of thy beloved and blessed Child, Jesus Christ, through whom we have received full knowledge of thee, God of angels and powers, and of all creation, and of the whole family of the righteous, who live before thee, I bless thee that thou hast granted unto me this day and hour, that I may share, among the number of the martyrs, in the cup of Christ, for the resurrection to eternal life, both of soul and body in the immortality of the Holy Spirit. And may I today be received among them before thee, as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, as thou, the God without falsehood and of truth, hast prepared beforehand and shown forth and fulfilled..."

And so Polycarp honored his Savior with his dying breath.

Do you know the Savior Polycarp knew? Do you know the Savior the way Polycarp knew Him? If you belong to Christ you will see Polycarp one day. And countless others who have been tortured, imprisoned, and killed for Christ. You'll hear their stories of how they gladly gave their all for Christ. Will you be able to share a story of giving *your all* for Christ?

So here's the bottom line question. *Are we ready to suffer for Christ?*

Our family members *are* suffering, and dying, 274 a day, 11 an hour, 1 martyr every 5 minutes. Let's pray for them, let's ask God to bless their testimony, let's rejoice at what they're experiencing in their home-going, and let's ask our Saving God to help us show the world His worth in our lives, come what may.

⁹ Barclay, 76