

The Lord's Word to His Church: Smyrna - The Persecuted Church

Revelation 2:8-11

⁸ *“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write,*

‘These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life: ⁹ “I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰ Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

¹¹ “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.” ’

Introduction

- Most churches received very harsh condemnation – five of them. Two of them do not. In the case of two of them – the church at Smyrna and the church at Philadelphia – there is no rebuke. Those two churches have not succumbed to the pressure of the hostility and the paganism in which they are embedded. They’re lighthouses in a dark world of idolatry, paganism, and satanic philosophy.
- To each of those churches, there comes this letter from the Lord Himself embedded in the whole book of Revelation. We can assume then that when John received the book of Revelation from the Holy Spirit over whatever period of time it took for him to have all those visions and write it down, he then made six copies. And there were with him seven representatives of those churches, seven pastors from those churches; and to each of them, he gave a full copy of the book of Revelation, and of course, the very special letter to that church. When they had received those letters and the book of Revelation, they left because they were there as visitors – we don’t know all the details of that. They went back to Asia Minor and they began to go from city to city to city on their way to each of the churches to give each church the book of Revelation, as well as to read to each church this specific letter to them.
- The context is persecution, but it seems as though one of the churches received the greatest amount of persecution. Just by reading through the seven letters, it seems as if Smyrna was receiving the greatest amount of persecution. Why is that? Well, perhaps, the other five churches that don’t seem to have been significantly persecuted were not persecuted because to

one degree or another, they capitulated. In the case of Ephesus, as we saw last week, they had left their first love. Well, what that means is a cooling of their zeal for Christ, and perhaps the cooling of that zeal for Christ mitigated against the persecution. They, having cooled in their love to Christ, may not have seemed as much a threat.

- The other churches that don't seem to be persecuted were churches that had come to a very comfortable compromise with the world, the churches that tolerated sin, the churches that were virtually spiritually lifeless. There really wasn't a whole lot to persecute because in some ways, the world had moved in and taken some measure of control. But there were two churches – the church of Smyrna and the church of Philadelphia – that stood apart from those churches that are rebuked by the Lord. And as we look at Smyrna, we're going to see this church was an extremely persecuted church.
- Let me begin reading in verse 8. "To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this: 'I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful 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 will not be hurt by the second death.'"
- When our Lord said He would build His church back in Matthew, chapter 16, He also said, "The gates of hell would not prevail against it." The gates of hell – that's a euphemism for death. What He was saying was that Satan was going to attack the church with deadly force. Literally, there would be martyrdom. But even though believers were martyred – killed, even though they necessarily had to be faithful unto death – as those in Smyrna were told "the gates of hell, the power of death, and the hands of Satan could not overpower the church, could not prevail against it." Now, this assumes a relentless, hell-bent assailing of the church throughout its history, and it has been the case. The world, of course, hates God, Christ, the Word of God, the followers of Christ, the preachers of Scripture; and consequently, persecution is a reality.
- In the upper room, John 16:33, Jesus said, "In the world you will have tribulation." Second Timothy 3:12, the Lord said, "All who live godly in this present age will suffer persecution." When Peter wrote his epistle, he warned that there would come suffering in the 2nd chapter, 1 Peter 2; then again in the 3rd chapter; then again in the 4th chapter; then again in the 5th chapter. He basically repeatedly said, "You're going to suffer, you're going to suffer, you're going to suffer." And he said, "You're going to suffer for godliness, you're going to suffer for righteousness sake." But he summed it all up in 1 Peter 5:10 with these words: "After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen, and establish you." The fiercest

persecution has the affect of perfecting, confirming, strengthening, and establishing the church. Persecution doesn't destroy the church, it makes it strong.

- Many years ago, I had numerous opportunities to go to Eastern Europe and to meet believers behind the old Iron Curtain to minister in places where pastors were sent to Siberia, where Christians were persecuted constantly, where they couldn't get an education, they couldn't keep a job. They were under surveillance at all times. They were abused by the authorities, the atheistic communism that dominated Eastern Europe. But everywhere I went I saw devout, dedicated, committed Christians who were strong, settled, confirmed, and well-founded believers – just what Peter said. That's what suffering does.
- The church in Smyrna that we just read about was purified by suffering, suffering that came as a form of persecution. Now, this is a real town in the ancient world. It is the second of the seven that are mentioned in these chapters. In Asia Minor, the message is going to be sent to these churches by the hand of the messenger that is in presence of John who will take it back to the church. Smyrna is the next stop on the postal route from Ephesus. Verses 1 through 7 last time we dealt with Ephesus; now Smyrna.
- Smyrna's about 35 to 40 miles north of Ephesus – we're moving north from Ephesus. There is no condemnation of this church. It has been purified and purged of error, purified and purged of sin by suffering. The price for being a Christian in that city was very, very high. It was a very anti-gospel, anti-God place. But John has only praise for the church. Now, most of what I'm going to talk to you about tonight is history because I want you to understand the history of this unique place.
- Historically, Caesar was the persecutor, and the particular Caesar was a man named Domitian. He was a murderous dictator who launched extensive persecutions against the church – blood baths. He launched them in the earliest years of the church in that very first century, and it moved throughout the Roman Empire, the Roman kingdom. And it came down with force in the city of Smyrna. To that church, this letter is given.
- Now, let's look at the components of it. The angel of the church is the messenger. *Aggelos* is the word translated "messenger." It can be an angel that's a heavenly messenger. It can just as well be an earthly messenger, and it's best to see this as a man who is the messenger taking this letter and the book of Revelation back to that church – very likely an elder or a pastor in the congregation.
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1) The Framework of the Letter to Smyrna

⁸ *“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write,
‘These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to
life:”*

2) The Context of the Word to Smyrna

⁹ *“I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I
know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but
are a synagogue of Satan.”*

3) The Perspective Given to Smyrna

¹⁰ *Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed,
the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be
tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death,
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4) The Encouragement Offered to Smyrna

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Conclusion

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- I want to draw your attention in a message to the 2nd chapter of Revelation – Revelation, chapter 2 – and I told you a couple of weeks ago when we began this little series that I wanted to give you a perspective on the church living in a pagan world, the church in a hostile environment. And that is exactly what we have in the opening three chapters of the book of Revelation. We have evidence that the church is under persecution, severe persecution.
- In chapter 1 of Revelation, as the book unfolds and John introduces himself in verse 9, he says, “I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.” John, the last living apostle, the time the final decade of the first century. John has been faithful as an apostle, as a preacher, as an evangel. The Lord has used him to give leadership to the churches in Asia Minor, modern Turkey. But as Revelation opens up, John is an exile. He has been sent to basically a prison island, an exile, a penal colony, living on a rock in the Mediterranean where they crushed rocks and did manual labor with no hope of ever escaping. John says he is there because of two things: the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.
- He was faithful to proclaim the Word of God and the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. This means that John was the product of persecution. He had been certainly the most important person in the churches of Asia Minor, of which there were seven, and they are named for us in that same first chapter and verse 11: seven cities on the postal route through ancient Asia Minor, and seven churches – one in each of those cities. If the great apostle was under persecution, so were the believers. And so we have in chapters 2 and 3 then letters from our Lord Himself to these seven churches, specific letters that lay out for us something about the character of those churches, the condition of those churches, and our Lord’s word to them.
- Most churches received very harsh condemnation – five of them. Two of them do not. In the case of two of them – the church at Smyrna and the church at Philadelphia – there is no rebuke. Those two churches have not succumbed to the pressure of the hostility and the paganism in which they

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"So the messenger of the church in Smyrna write:" John is told to write, "The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this." In each case, we have an introduction to the writer. It could say, "This is from the Lord Jesus Christ," but it doesn't do that. In chapter 2, verse 1, the writer is "the one who holds the seven stars in His right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands." Here, the writer is "the first and last, who is dead, and has come to life."

In verse 12, the writer is "the one who has the sharp two-edged sword." In verse 18, the writer is "the Son of God who has eyes like a flame of fire and feet like burnished bronze." In chapter 3, verse 1, the writer is "the one who has the seven Spirits of God and seven stars." In verse 7, the writer is "the one who is holy, true, has the key of David, open and no one shuts, shuts and no one opens." And in the last letter, chapter 3, verse 14, the writer is "the Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God." Now, all of those titles of Christ are given in chapter 1. All of those appear in chapter 1. I'm not going to take you back through all of that, but just one at a time.

The introduction here: "The first and the last, who is dead, and has come to life. The first and the last, who is dead, and has come to life." Go to chapter 1, verse 17. Our Lord introduces Himself to John end of verse 17: "Do not be

afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living One, and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and have the keys of death and of Hades.” So Christ is introduced from the magnificent, unparalleled picture that is given of Him in chapter 1.

And by the way, the first and the last is a title given to God. If you go back to Isaiah 41:4, 44:6, and 48:12, you will read there that God calls Himself the first and the last, the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega, the eternal one, who always was and always will be, the first and the last. This is used again in the book of Revelation in reference to Christ in the final chapter, 22:13, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” This is to speak of the eternity of God and the eternity of Christ. So the letter is from the Lord of the church, from the eternal one, the eternal infinite God, already in existence when all things were created and remaining after all things are uncreated, transcending all time and all creation, the eternal God. Not only that, but who was dead, and has come to life.

You say, “Wait a minute, if God is eternal, how can He be dead and come to life?” Only in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the eternal living God – beyond all time, beyond all space, beyond all history – everlastingly in existence, entered time and space in the form of Christ to die and rise again. He died as a man for sin and now lives, risen to bring us justification.

There’s an interesting statement about Him in Hebrews 7:16 that brings together the eternity of God and the death of Christ. It says in Hebrews 7:16 that “Christ arose by the power of an endless life.” What a great statement: “Christ arose by the power of an endless life.” Death could not hold Him. The body of Jesus died and went into the grave. The Son of God did not die, and by the power of that endless life, raised the body that did die in resurrection.

So this is the writer; it is none other than our Lord Himself. I would love to get a letter from the Lord Jesus, “Dear Grace Church, this is how I see you, and this is what I want to say to you.” How helpful that would be. And can’t you imagine that church in Smyrna beleaguered poor, downtrodden, considered scum, hated, despised, feeling small and insignificant; under persecution, tribulation; facing the possibility of martyrdom, death: how wonderful it was to get a letter from the Lord without any criticism, without any condemnation. How comforting would that be? How encouraging would that be?

First of all, it was encouraging that this came from the eternal one who knew everything. It was encouraging that Jesus had died and risen, and had the power of death and Hades in His hands. So the worst that could happen to them,

death couldn't hold them any more than it could hold Him. Though John writes down the words, the author is the Lord Himself.

Now, what about this church? We don't know when it was founded specifically; perhaps during the three years that Paul was in Ephesus. He was in Ephesus for three years – this is 35-40 miles away. It is never mentioned in the book of Acts, the church of Smyrna. It was a remarkable church, a pure church. We don't have anything specifically stated about it, with the exception of the 19th chapter of the book of Acts and verse 10. Paul is preaching, speaking boldly, reasoning and persuading people in Ephesus about the kingdom of God, verse 10: "This took place for two years, so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks."

Well, that's Asia Minor, and that includes Smyrna. We can assume that during that explosion of the gospel, the preaching of the Word of God under the apostle Paul noted there in the 19th chapter of Acts, the gospel had gone throughout Asia. All in Asia heard, and some in Smyrna were converted, and a church was born there. Life was very dangerous for them because they would not say something that everybody else had to say, and that is: "Caesar is Lord, Caesar is Lord." And not to say that Caesar is Lord could be fatal. Mass executions of Christians occurred throughout that first century when they didn't say "Caesar is Lord." Well, what was the watch word, the byword, the testimony of Christians? "Jesus is Lord." That could be a death sentence.

And by the way, Smyrna means "myrrh." It's a Greek word for myrrh. You know what myrrh is? Myrrh is ointment that comes from a thorny tree. It was used to create fragrances that were placed on bodies in embalming. It was a beautiful fragrance. Matthew 2 says wise men brought Jesus Smyrna – myrrh. Mark 15: Christ was offered wine with myrrh. Apparently, it also had some kind of sedative property.

John 19 says when they buried the body of Christ, they covered His body with aloes and Smyrna and myrrh. So Smyrna or myrrh, really the same thing, becomes a picture of suffering. Myrrh was used to place on dead bodies because the Jews didn't embalm them, they just covered up the smell. And of course in ancient times, there weren't a lot of very adequate techniques for dealing with dead bodies anyway.

So here is the church called myrrh, the church that needs, in a sense, to be anointed because it's facing death. Perfectly shows the character of a suffering church, suffering all the way to death. Myrrh supposedly had to be crushed to send for its fragrance, to yield its aroma. God permitted Satan to crush the lives of people in the town of Myrrh to send forth the sweetness of their fragrance

heavenward. So like a wounded child, maybe fleeing to a loving parent, so the crushed Christians at Smyrna fled for refuge to their Lord. They were suffering persecution. Death was a reality, and they were coming to Christ for comfort and refuge.

It is a poor church. Verse 9 says, “I know your poverty.” They didn’t have human resources. And unlike Ephesus, they didn’t abandon their first love, they loved, and they loved the Lord with zeal, and that’s why perhaps, as I said, they were so persecuted. The more they loved the Lord, the more evident it became, the more of a problem they were. So we meet the myrrh church – Smyrna. A small group of Christ-loving saints – destitute, crushed, powerless, persecuted, but comforted in the presence of their Savior.

Now, just a little bit about the city itself – very interesting – Smyrna. It was said by historians that it was the most beautiful city in Asia Minor. And Asia Minor can be a very beautiful place, even today – the land of Turkey. Smyrna was called the crown of Asia, the crown of Asia Minor – magnificent. It’s magnificence, however, must have at times seemed like a poor compensation for something the architect of the city had neglected. Historians say in planning the city, he omitted the drains – that’s right, the drains – so the streets ran like sewers, particularly in rainy times. So the fragrance of Smyrna was not just myrrh.

Smyrna was old. It was as far back as history goes. There was a city there way back in human history. It was rebuilt 290 years before Christ. It suffered from earthquakes, fires, wars; and it was rebuilt, and rebuilt, and rebuilt. Today, today, it is a major city in Turkey called Izmir. That’s the contemporary name of Smyrna – Izmir.

If you go to Ephesus, you will find no city there. There is none. You will find no church there. You will find ruins that are magnificent, and the name they give to it is Kusadasi. It is Ephesus. You have to go a long way to get to a city. If you go to the rubble that is the ancient Smyrna, you will be in Izmir. Ephesus is gone, its harbor silted up; but Smyrna lives. And in Smyrna, there are still Christians.

Now, there are, I think – from what I read – about 250 churches in Izmir. They would be Coptic churches, Catholic churches, Orthodox churches, Syriac churches – all kinds of sacerdotal churches. But there are folks who tell us there are believers in Izmir, still even to this day. Christ has His own there. He removed the candle out of Ephesus; never out of Smyrna. Christians today are still persecuted there by Muslims, severely persecuted, with a deadly persecution.

In Roman times, Smyrna was a great city with a harbor. The harbor was inland about 35 miles – one of the world’s finest we’re told, lovely place. Aristides said, “The winds blow through every part of Smyrna and make it as fresh as a grove of trees,” which may have been some small compensation for the fact that some of the wind causes a problem if you didn’t have any way to get rid of the sewage. But nonetheless, ancient writers speak favorably of that place.

The setting was beautiful. To some, they said it was the ideal city in the earth – began at the harbor, traversed the beautiful narrow foothills. And then behind the city, there was the Pagos – a hill covered with temples and noble glorious buildings. It was a center of science. It was even an ancient center of medicine. Smyrna was a free city. It had always been on the winner’s side in all Roman civil wars, so it maintained its freedom. It was a stronghold of emperor worship, that’s why Rome left it alone. It was the center of all kinds of pagan worship – the worship of Cybele, Apollo, Asclepius, Aphrodite, Zeus. All of those deities had temples in Smyrna. And there was also there a glorious temple in tribute to Homer, who was born there.

Every year, every citizen of Smyrna had to burn incense to Caesar. There was as great altar there – Caesar’s altar – and you had to go every year and burn incense to Caesar, and receive then a certificate that you had done that. Without a certificate, you would be persecuted because you were violating the highest law in Smyrna. To be without a certificate, as must have been the case for Christians who would not say Caesar is Lord, but only Jesus is Lord, was to risk discovery and death.

About a half century after John, the pastor of the church at Smyrna who knew John – and I’ll say more about him – was burned alive, burned alive at the age of 86; and history says he was at least the twelfth significant martyr in Smyrna. The city of Smyrna joined hands with the Romans because they got out of the Romans what they wanted. The Romans hated Christianity, so they hated Christianity.

There was another community in Smyrna that hated Christianity, it was the Jewish community. The Jews repeatedly informed the authorities of Smyrna against Christians, and incited the local government to attack them. They were under all kinds of pressure. But our Lord speaks to them in a commending way in verse 9 – look at it: “I know your tribulation. I know your tribulation. I know your thlipsis – pressure, persecution, crushing.” Kind of goes with myrrh. That word thlipsis means “to be crushed, to be pressed.” “I know what you’re going through, your tribulation.”

It had come for three reasons. Number One: their opposition to emperor worship. Since 200 years before Christ, Rome had personified Dea Roma, Rome itself, as a goddess, and she had been built in Smyrna. Rome was a goddess, and Caesar was God. Smyrna became a center of the worship of Rome and Caesar. Could be said there, “We have no god but Caesar.” The Christians, of course, would refuse to offer incense before the altar of the emperor. A great bust of the emperor was there. They would not call him Lord, so they were at odds with the government. The opposition came over the issue of emperor worship.

Secondly, pagan worship itself. They worshipped all the gods that I mentioned earlier, and many more – temples, festivals, gods, goddesses, by the thousands; and the Christians would not. They were out of sync with the culture in every way. Thirdly, there was opposition because of the Jews, because of the Jews; that is stated as such.

Back to verse 9: “I know the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. I know the blasphemy of the Jews who are a synagogue of Satan.” What a statement. They had always been a synagogue of God, always. They would celebrate the fact that they worship the one true living God. They had rejected, however, their Messiah; and in rejecting their Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, Judaism really demonstrated that it was as Satanic as emperor worship, or the worship of any other false god, or any false religion. They were blasphemers. They say they are Jews, but they are guilty of blasphemy. Well, what is blasphemy? Words spoken against God, slandering God. They hated Christ; therefore, they hated God. They blasphemed Christ; therefore, they hated God.

Paul says in Romans 2, “Not all Israel is Israel. Not all Jews are true Jews.” And that’s what this means: “They say they are Jews, but they are not. They’re not true Jews,” Romans 2:28 and 29. Not all Jews are real Jews, or true Jews.

So there were these Christ-hating, gospel-hating Jewish people. Synagogues in the town became synagogues of Satan and came against the true believers. They were slandered at the hands of Jews. The Jews joined the heathens in putting them to death. The hatred of the Jews for Christians, frankly, is a familiar thing in the book of Acts. You see it in chapter 13 at Antioch. You see it in chapter 14 at Iconium and Lystra. You see it in Acts 17 at Thessalonica. The Jews persecuted Christians; they were brutal to them.

There’s an interesting book written by Podhoretz – I think you said it – called “Why Jews are Liberal.” It’s a really interesting book to read; and in that

book, he's answering the question, "Why Jewish people are so liberal in America when America has given them something that no country they've ever been in in the world has given them – freedom, opportunity like they've never experienced anywhere else in the world; certainly in all the centuries they were in Europe. Why are they liberal?" And their liberality, he says, goes back to the fact that they resent deeply – they resent in a kind of chronological generational sense, Christianity, because in the name of Christ, throughout Europe, Jews were persecuted by so-called Christians. Christians have persecuted Jews historically, and that's why it's sometimes so difficult to reach them. But at the beginning, it was the opposite. It was Jews who weren't really Jews persecuting Christians who were Christians; and then it was Christians who were not really Christians persecuting Jews.

In the Roman Empire, there were many wealthy Jews who had the ear of the authorities, and they sought to blot out the infant church, to wipe it out; and they knew that the nation had rejected Christ. They wanted nothing to do with Him. The first Roman emperor to kill Christians was Nero, and he actually chose two Jewish friends, two Jewish proselyte friends – one an actor named Aletourus, and the other his own lover, Poppaea; and Nero used them to kill Christians. They fed ill-will, slander, into the ears of Nero.

In Smyrna, there was a significant Jewish population, and they poisoned the minds of the leaders and the people against the Christians. "They claimed to be Jews –" it says, "– but they are not. They are a synagogue of Satan." So whether it was emperor worship, pagan idolatry, or the hostility of the Jews, they suffered immensely. And they were poor, they were poor. They didn't have resources. This kind of poverty here is a Greek word that means they had nothing. It doesn't mean they were sort of a middle-class or lower-middle-class, they were the lowest of the low. That was part of the persecution.

To illustrate this, there's a great historical name that you must remember. To illustrate the hatred of the Christians in Smyrna, history has left us the details of the death of Polycarp. Polycarp knew John. Polycarp worked with John in the churches of Asia Minor. Polycarp was the pastor of the church, historians tell us, at Smyrna. And Polycarp was murdered in 155 A.D. at the age of about 86. I'll read you one account.

In a letter addressed by the church at Smyrna to the churches in the Christian world, it is related that Jews joined with heathen in clamoring that Polycarp, the Christian leader of Smyrna, should be cast to the lions or burned alive, and were foremost in bringing logs for the fire, and in the endeavor to prevent the remains of the martyr from being delivered to his Christian friends for burial. It was the time of the public games. The city was crowded; the

crowds were excited. Suddenly, the shout went up, “Away with the atheists. Let Polycarp be searched for.”

No doubt, says this historian, Polycarp could have escaped, but already he had had a dream in which he saw the pillow under his head burning with fire, and he had awakened to tell his disciples, “I will be burned alive.” His whereabouts were betrayed to the persecutors by a little slave girl who collapsed under torture, and they came to arrest him. Not even the soldier captain wished to see Polycarp die.

On the brief journey to the city, he pled with the old man, “What harm is it –” he said “– to say, ‘Caesar is Lord’ and to offer sacrifice and save your life?” But Polycarp was adamant that for him, only Jesus Christ was Lord. He entered the arena. The proconsul gave him the choice of cursing the name of Christ and making sacrifice to Caesar or death. His famous words are these: “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. Polycarp replied, “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 an everlasting punishment. Why are you waiting? Come do what you will.” He remained unmoved.

So the crowds came flocking with sticks from the workshops and from the baths, and the Jews, even although they were breaking the Sabbath law by carrying such burdens, were foremost in the clamor and in bringing wood for the fire. They were going to bind him to the stake. “Leave me as I am –” Polycarp said, “– 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 binding.” So they left him loosely bound in the flames, and there he died for his Christ.

There’s another account that says someone reached into where he was, seeing such tranquility, and ran a knife into him to hasten his death. This is accurate history. This is what happened to the pastor of the church at Smyrna. This is Polycarp who knew the apostle John. This is Polycarp who wrote a letter to the church at Philippi.

We have existing writings from this man giving testimony to the truth the apostles preached. This church had no resources, so poor – slandered, accused, imprisoned, killed. Polycarp was a kind of fulfillment of what the Lord said was going to come; look at verse 10: “Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you’ll be

tested, and you'll have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful unto death, be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life."

This was a poor church, verse 9 says, but parenthesis says "but you are –" what? "– rich." "Humanly speaking, materially speaking – poor. But you are rich." Contrast that with the church of Laodicea in chapter 3, verse 17: "You say, 'I am rich and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,' and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked." The church in Smyrna had nothing and was spiritually rich; the church in Laodicea had everything and was spiritually bankrupt.

Who's really rich? So the command in verse 10: "Do not fear what you are about to suffer." Like Psalm 56:11 says, "In God I put my trust, I will not be afraid." More suffering is to come. "Specifically, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison," very specific. "Some of you are going to prison." We don't have any records about that. "You will have tribulation ten days."

That could be specific that it could be only a temporary ten-day imprisonment, or it could actually be over a period of ten days when they were all going to be put in prison, or a great number of them put in prison – not that they were in prison for ten days, but over a ten-day period, these arrests would go on. Some commentators even suggest that it's not so much ten actual days as a period of persecution. We do know that it lasted at least until 50 or 60 years after the revelation was written, all the way to the death of Polycarp. "You're going to be persecuted. Be faithful unto death, and I'll give you the crown of life. Be faithful unto death."

You know, the Bible says a lot about "if you endure to the end, you will be saved," right? "Abide." Another way to say what we were saying this morning – abide, remain, stay. This is the great truth of perseverance, perseverance. If you endure, you are a true believer.

The words of our Lord come to my mind in Matthew 24:13, "The one who endures to the end, he will be saved." And this is in a context of persecution. "They will deliver you to tribulation, kill you. You'll be hated by all nations. False prophets will arise and mislead many. Because lawlessness has increased, most people's love will grow cold. The one who endures to the end, he will be saved – the one who endures to the end." True faith survives. True faith endures. True faith is proven by persecution.

In the 10th chapter of Matthew, verse 22, "You will be hated by all because of My name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved." True believers go through it all. They go through it triumphantly. They go through it victoriously.

The counsel is this: you're going to be persecuted; you're going to feel the persecution; it's going to be severe. Satan is going to be unleashing on you

hostilities that are going to cause some of you to go to prison. There may be many of you who go to prison for a time. There may be a particularly heated time in which you'll be put in prison. It's going to cost some of you your life; you're going to be tested all the way to death. "Be faithful and I will give you the crown of life."

What is the crown of life? The crown which is life, the crown which is eternal life. All that is is the promise of heaven. "Be faithful through persecution, whatever it is – prison, execution – be faithful all the way to the end and I will give you the crown which is eternal life." The crown is eternal life.

And then He says, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes – overcomes all threats, all persecution, all hostility, all tribulation, all attacks, all deaths – will not be hurt by the second death." You may die the first one – that's physical death. You will never experience the second one – that's spiritual death – if you are an overcomer.

What do we mean overcomer? We have to understand that; and for that, we go back to 1 John 5. Remember, "Whoever is born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith, our faith. Who is the one who overcomes the world? He who believes that Jesus is the Son of God." If you have true faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, you will overcome. You may be hurt by death, temporal death – the first death, if you will – you will never be hurt by the second death. The second death is the final death. It is that eternal death. "That will not touch you."

The book of Revelation ends with that promise: "Behold, I'm coming quickly, My reward is with Me to render everyone according to what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. Blessed are those who wash their robes so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city." You're going right on into eternity.

Earlier in chapter 20 – this is so wonderful – verse 12: "I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne. The books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things in the book according to their deeds. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire." You'll never experience that. If you are a true believer with a faith that overcomes all this, even to the first death, you will never experience the second death.

So we meet the poor little rich church – crushed, persecuted, fragrant, victorious. In the end, martyred, imprisoned, but everlastingly victorious; eternally triumphant, willing to die once, but never to die twice. If you have ears, hear this message.

Lord, we thank You for, again, this wonderful glimpse into the lives of precious saints of Yours long ago. Thank You for the testimony that they have.

It stands before us as a model of our faithfulness, no matter what may come our way, no matter what persecution comes our way. Wherever we are in the world, or even here in America; whatever may happen in the future; may we be faithful through the tribulation; may we be faithful to face death once that we may never face it twice. Make us a triumphant and faithful church, to Your glory we pray. Amen.