

THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH IN SMYRNA, REVELATION 2:8-11

Well let's turn please in our Bibles to the book of Revelation, chapter 2. We're going to be reading chapter 2, verses 8 through 11. This is the letter to the church at Smyrna. Notice Revelation 2 and verse 8:

“⁸ And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive; ⁹ I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰ Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life. ¹¹ He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.”

Now the book of Revelation begins in its opening chapters with Christ and His church. In chapter 1, we have the grand revelation of Jesus Christ as the majestic sovereign of His people and as the victorious Savior of His people. He is portrayed as the powerful ruler and as the merciful deliverer of all of those who trust in Him. He is the faithful witness who always speaks the truth. And He is the Prince of the kings of the earth who always defeats His enemies. It is this Christ who is revealed in chapter 1 who then speaks to His churches in chapters 2 and 3.

We see in chapters 2 and 3 that Jesus is focused on His churches. He is focused on how they are doing, and the struggles they have, the persecutions they endure, the sins they have fallen into, and the virtues they practice. All of these are of the most intense concern to Jesus Christ. The church is the kingdom of God on earth. The church represents Christ in His message to the world. The church is Christ's body. The church is Christ's bride. And therefore, the church is at the forefront of Christ's attention and the church is at the center of Christ's affection. Everything Christ is doing in this world revolves around the church, and through it He is destroying the works of the Devil on earth. Therefore, it is no wonder that the church—her condition, her challenges, her concerns—is the first thing He addresses as He opens this manual of spiritual warfare, otherwise known as the book of Revelation.

Last time we said that each of these letters that Christ writes to His churches follows a similar sevenpoint structure, with a few exceptions:

- first, there is an address to the pastor of each church;
- second, there is a description given of Christ;
- third, there is a commendation of their good works and character, with the exception, of course, of the church at Laodicea, of whom Jesus has nothing good to say;
- fourth, there is a correction of their sins and defects, except for the church of Smyrna, which we're going to study today, and the church of Philadelphia, about which He has nothing negative to say;
- fifth, there is a warning given to each church, either of the need to repent or of the need to reinforce what they are already doing and remain faithful to it;

- sixth, there is an exhortation to hear and heed what the Spirit is saying to the churches;
- and seventh, there is a promise of comfort and consolation given to those who overcome the temptation to apostasy. And this sevenpoint structure, exists with a few exceptions, in each of these letters.

Each of these letters, therefore, has the same outline. There is an introduction, consisting of the recipient of the letter and the author of the letter. There is a message, which contains the commendation, if any; the condemnation, if any; the warning to repent or to endure or remain faithful; then there is, of course, a conclusion, which consists of an exhortation and a promise.

This is the outline that we used last week as we expounded the letter to the church at Ephesus, and it's the exact same outline that we'll be using every week as we proceed through these seven letters together.

Now it's useful to note that each of these churches has a unique characteristic, and no two of them are the same. Ephesus is the orthodox but coldhearted church. You remember, they had left their first love. Smyrna is the suffering church. Pergamos is the morally compromised church. Thyatira is a church that has corrupt leadership. Sardis is the dying church. Philadelphia is the weak church. Laodicea is the lukewarm church.

Now when you look at these churches as a whole, we see that overall they are a very mixed bag, and as a whole, these churches seem to be in poor spiritual health. They are very much like the churches we see in our day. We look across America, and what do we see as the condition of the churches? We see that, overall, the Christian churches are compromised in many ways, and overall and in general, the churches in America are in poor spiritual health.

Never were the letters to these seven churches more relevant to the churches of today than they are right now. All of the defects and all of the weaknesses and all of the problems that we see in these seven churches we see in the churches in America. These letters are not only relevant to the churches of our day, they are relevant to our particular church that we're sitting in right now.

So what we want to do is, we want to read and we want to hear and we want to listen very carefully to the message that Christ has to these churches, because that is His message to our church. And while not everything He says about every one of these churches is applicable to us, much of it is, and it is our job as a church to ask, Do we have these virtues? Do we have these weaknesses? Are we heeding these warnings? Are we following these exhortations? Do we see Christ in this fashion in which He presents Himself to His church?

So we see chapter 1 opens with Christ, chapters 2 and 3 present His church, and in chapters 4 and 5, we're going to see what's going on in heaven. And only after that are we going to look out and see what's happening in the world, in chapter 6 and following. So really, these first five chapters set the stage for then everything that happens in chapter 6 and following.

Well, we come today to the letter to the church at Smyrna. We want to consider together what Christ has to say to this suffering church, a church for which He has no criticism to offer, only encouragement, and then of course a warning, and then an exhortation and a wonderful promise.

In the first place then this morning, let's consider together the introduction of the letter to Smyrna. The introduction to the letter of Smyrna is in verse 8: "And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive." In verse 8, we are told who the recipient of this letter is and we are also told who the author of this letter is. Notice first of all, the recipient of this letter is the pastor of the church in Smyrna. It says, "And unto the angel," unto the pastor, "of the church in Smyrna write."

Smyrna was a town which was a little north of Ephesus, on the west coast of Asia, which is of course modern day Turkey. Ephesus was in the southwest corner and Smyrna was in the middle west corner, the west shore of modern day Turkey. Like Ephesus, Smyrna was a port city. It was noted for its beauty and for its climate, and it was especially noted for being a city that was incredibly loyal and zealous and faithful to Rome and to the Roman government. They had temples to Roma, which was the spirit of the kingdom of Rome. So it was a city that was very, very, very proRoman Empire.

We don't know for sure because we're not explicitly told, but it's highly probable that the church at Smyrna was founded by Paul during his third missionary journey, in particular sometime between AD 53 and 56 while he was at Ephesus. In Acts chapter 19, we're told of this two year ministry of Paul in Ephesus, and we are told in Acts 19 and verse 10 that during that time "all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks."

These two cities of Ephesus, where Paul was, and Smyrna, where this letter was written to, were only about 30 miles apart. Smyrna is about 30 miles north of Ephesus. Therefore, during those two years that Paul was there, in which it says, "all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord," Paul may very well have led missionary efforts to reach that city for Jesus Christ.

It's also highly probable that at the time this letter was written to Smyrna, Polycarp was the pastor of the church. We know that Polycarp was a disciple of the apostle John. We know that John was an elder in the church at Ephesus after his exile in Patmos ended. Therefore, we can learn something about the conditions in Smyrna by reading in the early church fathers' writings about this man Polycarp. Polycarp was burned at the stake by the Roman government in AD 155. He had been asked to say "Caesar is lord," but he refused.

Brought to the stadium, the proconsul urged him saying, "Swear and I will set thee at liberty. Reproach Christ!" Polycarp answered, "Eighty and six years have I served Him and He never did me any injury. How, then, can I blaspheme my King and Savior?" When the proconsul again pressed him, the old man answered, "Since thou art vainly urgent that I should swear by the fortune of Caesar and pretend not to know who and what I am, let me declare with boldness: I am a Christian." A little later, the proconsul answered, "I have wild beasts at hand. To these

will I cast thee, except thou repent. I will cause thee to be consumed by fire, seeing that thou despisest the wild beasts if thou will not repent.” But Polycarp said, “Thou threatenest me with fire which burneth for an hour and after a little is extinguished, but are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment reserved for the ungodly. But why tarriest thou? Bring forth what thou wilt.” Soon afterward, the people began to gather wood and faggots, and Jews especially according to the custom, eagerly assisting the Romans. Thus Polycarp was burned at the stake.

So he says Polycarp was 86 years old. We know he was burned in 155, which means that he would have been about 25 or 26 years of age when the book of Revelation was written in the mid90s. This tells us what conditions were like among the cities and provinces that were zealously loyal to Rome, and therefore desired to make it known that they were loyal by compelling every citizen to acknowledge that Caesar was lord.

Persecution against Christians was not the same in every area and every city, but in Smyrna, they were zealous for Rome and they were zealous in persecuting Christians because they were zealous to show their loyalty to Caesar, and therefore wanted every citizen to acknowledge Caesar was lord. Thus the recipient of the letter—the pastor and the church at Smyrna.

Then notice secondly the author of the letter. The author of the letter is Christ, who in verse 8 identifies Himself with two titles. He says that He is the first and the last, and He says He is the one which was dead and is now alive.

As we have said, these descriptions that Christ gives of Himself to each church are especially suited to the needs of that particular church, and of course to any other church that is in the same situation as that church. So Jesus identified Himself by one set of titles to the church at Ephesus, another set of titles to the church at Smyrna, another set of titles to the church at Pergamos, and Thyatira, and so on. We need to pay attention to what Jesus says of Himself in verse 8, when He says, “These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive.” Those titles have relevance to what’s going on in the church at Smyrna.

Notice first of all, He identifies Himself as the first and the last. As we said when we studied chapter 1 and verse 11, when this term was first introduced to us as applying to Christ, we saw that this term “first and last” was drawn out of the Old Testament and that it is used repeatedly as a title and name for Jehovah in the book of Isaiah. We saw that Jesus is the Jehovah, the God of the Old Testament.

It is not Rome, but rather it is Christ who is the supreme authority over the world and over the nations and over all of the people within them. Rome is not the first to come, and Rome will not be the last to go. Rome began in time and Rome will end in time. But Christ is before all time, and Christ outlasts all time. He is truly the first that has ever been, and He is the last that will ever be, and He has all authority over all things inbetween the first and the last.

So the first thing that Jesus reminds the church at Smyrna of is that He is greater than Rome, that He is sovereign over Rome, that He was before Rome, and that He will outlast Rome. He is God of the Old Testament. As a result, He gave Rome its beginning and he will determine Rome's end, and then it will be gone. But He will remain forever. Therefore, the believers at Smyrna should not fear what Rome will do *to* them, but instead have faith in what Christ will do *for* them. It is Christ, not Rome, that they should reverence and rejoice in and worship as God.

So this is the first title by which Jesus identifies Himself. He identifies Himself as the first and the last, and therefore as the sovereign God over all kingdoms and over all persecutors.

Secondly, He identifies Himself—notice verse 8—as He “which was dead, and is alive.” Now this phrase, He which was dead and is alive, was also taken out of Revelation chapter 1. Notice if you will verses 17b and 18: “^{17b}Fear not; I am the first and the last”—there it is. And now notice verse 18: “I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death.”

Once again, we see Jesus going back to chapter 1 and pulling out those various attributes that were assigned of Him there, and then using them to bring comfort and guidance and instruction to His churches. Jesus is reminding this suffering church that is experiencing martyrdom at the hands of Rome that they do not need to fear being put to death for the refusal to acknowledge Caesar as lord.

Listen carefully: Death is not a problem for the believer. Death is not a problem for the believer because it is a condition that is easily remedied by Jesus Christ. He has defeated death, He has raised Himself from the grave, and therefore, He will defeat our death and He will raise every believer from the grave as well. Let the wicked threaten us with death. Let them put us to death. It isn't a problem because Christ will simply raise us from the dead.

We are told by Jesus in Luke 12 and verse 4, “And I say unto you my friends, Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do.” They can kill you? No problem. Don't be afraid of that.

It's kind of like if somebody said, I'm going to come over to your house and I'm going to go out in your yard, and I'm going to grab some stems of grass and I'm going to snap them off! It's like, No problem. I can grow more grass. Right? You wouldn't worry about that kind of a threat. And if the wicked are coming along and saying, I'm going to come and I'm going to snap your life out of existence, it's as if Jesus is saying, I'll just bring it back. No big deal.

Jesus says in John 11:25, “I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live.” So, yes, you're going to die. But you know what? That is a temporary, solvable problem. You are going to be brought back to life. Rome does not have the final authority over your persons. Rome does not have the final authority over your life. Jesus says, I am the first and the last. I am He who was dead and am alive.

And so, I am sovereign over Rome and I am sovereign over death, and therefore, fear neither Rome nor death when you see who I am. Rome is not a problem. So whatever suffering Christ ordains for them to endure, whether imprisonment or death, it is the worst they can do and will always end in victory and triumph over their persecutors, because He is the one who opens the prison and He is the one who raises the dead.

That brings us to our second major point. Having seen the introduction of the letter to Smyrna, both the recipients and the author, notice in the second place, the message of the letter to Smyrna in verses 9 and 10: “⁹I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.” So there’s the message of the letter to Smyrna.

Now notice first of all the commendation. Jesus says in verse 9, “I know.” In other words, Jesus is saying, I am completely aware and I am fully acquainted with everything that goes on in every church, including the church at Smyrna. He says in verse 9, “I know thy works,” that is, the good deeds in obedience to my commands that you have undertaken to accomplish. You, he says, have sought to observe and carry out all that I commanded you to do, and I have seen your service to me and I have seen your obedience to me, and I approve of all that you have done. I know the hard work you have done for me and the works you have done for my name’s sake.

He says in verse 9 that not only does He know their works, but He says He also knows their tribulation. He says, I know the oppression and the afflictions and the distress and the persecutions that you people have endured. I understand the trouble and the anguish and the burdens that you are experiencing. I know the pressures you face and the crushing burdens that you bear. I am fully acquainted with every one of them in every detail.

Then He says, not only does He know their works of obedience, not only does He know their tribulation in terms of their suffering, but then He says, I also know your poverty. He knew that these people were very poor and very destitute regarding material things. Now the question is, why were they so poor, in a very wealthy, rich, and economically vibrant city? It was a rival to Ephesus in terms of economic prosperity and activity. Well perhaps the reason why they were poor is because of their refusal to join the pagan trade guilds that required the worship of pagan gods in order to be members, and thus if you were not part of the guild, you couldn’t do business. Or perhaps they were poor because their persecutors had robbed them of their goods or seized those goods through force or fraud or fines.

In Hebrews 10 and verse 34, the writer says regarding the Hebrew Christians, you “took joyfully the spoiling of your goods, knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance.” Somehow, some way, these people were poor, and it’s not because they didn’t work and it’s not because they weren’t frugal and it’s not because they didn’t work to accumulate something, but the persecution was robbing them of their wealth.

But notice what is said in parenthesis in Revelation 2, verse 9. He says, I know your poverty, “but thou art rich.” Christ saw that they had immense treasure laid up in heaven as a result of their good works. He saw they had the unsearchable riches of Christ. He knew they had the true riches of salvation and of reward that would last for eternity. So therefore, it mattered little if they had little of the temporary riches that are going to soon pass away, and will certainly be left behind at death. Though they were poverty stricken materially, they were plutocrats spiritually.

You remember the story of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. And Lazarus lay at his gate in rags and with sores on his body, and desired to eat the crumbs that fell from the rich man’s table.

Now from a human point of view, the rich man was rich and Lazarus was poor. But from a spiritual point of view, the rich man was poor and Lazarus was rich. And you see that after death, don’t you, where the rich man doesn’t have any asset base whatsoever. He doesn’t even own a drop of water. And here’s Lazarus, sitting in Abraham’s bosom, possessing all things in the heavens. So from the world’s point of view, these people in Smyrna were way, way, way, way below the poverty line. But God says, You people are billionaires in spiritual wealth.

Now Jesus not only knew about their works and their tribulation and their poverty and their true spiritual riches, Jesus also knew something else. He knew all about the identity and the activity of their persecutors. Notice what he says in the latter part of verse 9. Not only does He say, I know your works and tribulation and poverty, He also says, “I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.” So Jesus knew all about the identity and the activity of their persecutors. He knew their character and conduct.

You know, from time to time we have these Islamic bombings, and you read in the newspapers how the police go on these searches and interrogate people to try to find the perpetrators. Well, Jesus doesn’t need to that. He already knows exactly who did everything. When someone does something to us, He knows who it is, and that’s what He’s declaring here. He knows their identity, He knows their activity, He knows their character, and He knows their conduct.

Now He identifies them in particular as Jews, and the Jews who lived in Smyrna were in political confederacy with the Romans in the persecution of the Christians. It is an historical fact that Judaism was a protected recognized religion under Roman rule, and because of that the Romans did not require the Jews to say, Caesar is lord. But everybody else had to do it. And of course the Jews saw the Christians leading Jews to Christ and they hated that, so they then became confederates with the Roman government in turning the Christians in to the Roman authorities for their imprisonment and for their martyrdom. The Jews claimed to be the people of God, but in fact they were serving Satan as they informed on the Christians to the Roman authorities, just like they were serving Satan when they informed on Jesus to the Roman authorities and got them to crucify Him.

In Revelation chapter 12, verse 10, it says, “And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ: for”—notice—“the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night.” Who is Satan? He is the accuser of the brethren. So when someone comes along and they’re a Jew and they accuse the brethren, what are they doing? They’re doing the work of Satan. Anyone who attacks and assaults Christians, anyone who persecutes them or facilitates their persecution is a servant of Satan, who is the chief and ultimate accuser of the believers. That’s why Jesus said to the Jews who persecuted Him, in John chapter 8, verse 44, that “ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it.”

So what do persecutors do? They lie about who you are and what you did, and then they kill you based on those lies. That’s why these Jews were said to be of the synagogue of Satan, because they were doing Satan’s work in and through their synagogues in informing on the Christians, lying about them, and then leading them to be murdered.

We see Paul doing this himself in Acts chapter 26 and verses 9 and 10. When he’s giving his testimony about his past life, he says: “⁹I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth.” So what did I do? I persecuted His people. He says “¹⁰...and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them.” Paul lied about the Christians and he got the Christians put to death. He was doing the work of Satan. He was of the synagogue of Satan. But then the grace and mercy of God saved that man and he became part of the synagogue of Christ. Wonder of wonders!

So those who reject the Savior and those who persecute believers are no longer the people of God. People think all the Jews in the Middle East are the chosen people of God. No, they aren’t. They’re the uncovenanted, discovenanted people of God, and the true Jews are now those who are born of *the* Jew, Jesus Christ, via the new birth, as it says in Galatians 3 and verse 29: “And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.” So who are the descendants of Abraham? Abraham begot Jesus and Jesus begot us through the new birth, and therefore, we are the new Judaism. The Christians are the synagogue of Christ.

As we read this morning in Romans chapter 2, verses 28 and 29, “²⁸For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: ²⁹but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.” So if you are regenerate and thus have a circumcised heart, the Bible says you are a Jew; and those who are circumcised in their bodies but not in their hearts, it specifically says, they are not Jews.

In John 16 and verse 2, it says, “²They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service.” The Jews thought they

were serving God. Paul thought he was serving God by casting the Christians out of the synagogue and by putting them to death. We see the Muslims think they're serving Allah by slaughtering the infidels—that's us. So it has ever gone on that people in the name of religion, in the name of god, who claim to be serving god, are killing the true people of God.

Now Jesus knew all about this. He says, I know their identity, I know their activity, I know their character, and I know their conduct. Our enemies are known to Christ, and He will deal very severely with them in due time. Since they are serving Satan, they will share in Satan's place in the lake of fire, under the wrath of God.

So His commendation to these people is: I know your works—the service you have done; He says, I know your tribulation; He says, I know the persecutions you've suffered; He says, I know your poverty, how that your finances have been ravaged; and He says, I know your enemies—every one of them.

Now He gives them this commendation of all the good things they have done and the sufferings they have endured. But notice secondly, not only His commendation, but His warning. Note there's no *condemnation*—we're skipping that point, because there isn't any. Notice His warning in verse 10: "Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life."

The warning in verse 10 is simply this: Do not be overcome by fear when you are suffering these persecutions, as though I have forsaken you or as though I am unwilling to protect and deliver you. We need to understand that no one may harm us without God's permission, but our passage is very clear, it is God's permission for the wicked to do many terrible things to us. It is God's will that His people do suffer affliction and imprisonment and even martyrdom. He allows Satan and his people to do terrible things to us. And why? Well, the middle of verse 10 tells us. It is "that ye may be tried." He says, "¹⁰ Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison"—here's why—in order that, for the purpose that, you might be put to the test.

You know why God allows persecution in our lives and why He allows the wicked to do terrible things to us? Because persecution is the trial that proves the reality of our faith or the lack thereof. Only those with genuine faith will endure persecution rather than deny Christ. Hebrews 12 and verse 7 says, "If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as sons." Endurance under chastening is the proof of sonship.

What you see is that God has one Son without sin, but He has no sons without suffering. Every one of God's sons suffers. And why? It's through suffering the reality and the genuineness of our faith is proven, because when suffering comes, the thornyground hearer and the rockyground hearer wither up and blow away. But the goodground hearers continue to grow and serve and follow Christ and keep on bringing forth fruit.

So suffering proves the reality of your faith. Those who do not have genuine faith, when suffering comes, they abandon the faith rather than endure the suffering. For those who have genuine faith, when the suffering comes, they cling to the faith even though it means enduring suffering. By that, our salvation and our love for Christ is demonstrated.

It goes on to say in verse 10 that this persecution and suffering is going to last ten days. He says, “and ye shall have tribulation ten days.” Now does that mean ten literal days? Well no, it doesn’t. You recall that when we studied numerology, “ten” conveyed the concept of perfection, like the Ten Commandments.

You remember when Daniel, in Daniel chapter 1, verses 12 to 20, and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were the king’s servants and were all supposed to eat the king’s meat that was offered to idols. Daniel said, I can’t eat that. That’s sin. Just feed me vegetables, i.e., give me pulse. He says, Test us ten days. Then after ten days, look on our countenances, and if we’re not healthier than the guys that are eating the meat offered to the idols, then, fine—you’re off the hook. And after ten days, it said that their face and their flesh was fatter and fuller than all the others. And then it says, and they were ten times wiser. What’s with all this “ten” stuff? The point is, ten is the number that conveys the idea of perfection.

He is saying that this persecution will neither be too short nor too long; rather, this persecution will last the perfect amount of time that is needed to fully prove the character and the faith of the believers, and to perfectly accomplish the purposes of God in allowing it to come to pass.

So when He says the persecution will last ten days, He’s saying it will last the perfect length of time needed to fully prove your character and faith and to fully and perfectly accomplish the purposes of God in allowing it to come to pass. What Jesus is telling these people is, I know you’re suffering. I see it. Guess what—you’re going to suffer a bunch more, and I’m going to allow it.

You know what? This is not the “healthandwealth” gospel. Jesus’ gospel is a gospel of suffering. And we get all whacked out when we suffer. We need to realize this is part of the plan, that we would suffer, and we suffer the perfect amount of time and to the perfect degree of distress in order to perfectly prove the legitimacy of our faith and to perfectly accomplish the purposes of God in allowing it. Suffering is certain, God is saying. But suffering is limited to the perfect amount and degree and time.

So God says to the people at Smyrna, Remain faithful, even to the point of death. See the last part of verse 10? He says, “be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.” In other words, remain faithful, not until you die—that’s not what He’s saying, though that’s true. He’s saying, Be faithful even if it costs you your life. In other words, don’t be faithful until the pain gets so much, and then cave and apostatize and abandon and worship Caesar as lord. He says, Sacrifice your life before you deny Christ.

The reward for faithfulness to Christ under persecution, He says, is the crown of life. This is the Stephanos crown, the crown that was given to the victor in the Olympic games. It's the victor's crown. The reward for faithfulness to Christ under persecution is the victor's crown, which is resurrection to eternal life.

Jesus said in Matthew 10 and verse 39, "He ...that loseth his life for my sake shall find it." This is why the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us. We have a little suffering, but what do we get? A crown. What is the crown? Everlasting life. And mark it down, people, where there is no cross, there will be no crown. That's why, when the crosses come, we take up those crosses daily and we carry them. We don't rid ourselves of them by conforming ourselves to the world, but rather, we endure them knowing that they are temporary, but the crown of life is eternal.

That then brings us to our third and final point. Having seen the introduction of the letter to Smyrna in verse 8, having seen the message of the letter to Smyrna in verses 9 and 10, notice finally the conclusion of the letter to Smyrna in verse 11. Here's the conclusion: "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death."

Notice first of all, the exhortation given. It's the same one in every single letter, said in the same way with the same words. It says, "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches," plural. So this letter is not just for those in Smyrna, but for all churches of all time in all places that are experiencing any kind of suffering. It's for them, too. Christ is speaking to us through the Holy Spirit. Notice what He says: "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the *Spirit* saith unto the churches."

So as you read this letter, the Spirit uses this letter to speak to your heart. Listen! Listen carefully. Reflect thoughtfully. Act on it willfully, purposefully, and zealously. That's the exhortation given. Don't let what you hear this morning go in one ear and out the other. Spend a lot of time thinking about what you heard, reflecting on what you heard, and applying what you heard to your life. That's the exhortation given.

The promise made is in verse 11b. Here it is: "He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death." Now what does overcoming look like? It looks like what Polycarp did when the proconsul said to him, I have fire, I have lions. Deny Christ, worship Caesar, and I'll let you go. If you don't, I'll throw you to the lions and burn you at the stake. And Polycarp said, Do what you will. Bring it on. I'm not denying Christ. I am a Christian. He overcame the proconsul.

Who won? Did the proconsul who burned him at the stake win? Or did Polycarp win? The answer is, Polycarp won. He overcame, because he overcame the temptation to deny Christ. The proconsul was powerless to triumph over him in getting him to deny Christ. Polycarp was powerful in overcoming the proconsul and maintaining his faith in Christ.

And that's what overcoming looks like. It says, I will not deny Christ, no matter what they do to me. It says those who overcome—that is, those who do not compromise truth and obedience to escape poverty, those who do not deny Christ to escape imprisonment and death—to them who remain faithful to Christ to the end, not only will they have a crown of eternal life, as verse 10 says, but they will also escape the second death, as verse 11 says.

What is the second death? The book of Revelation tells us very clearly what the second death is. Turn please to Revelation chapter 20. It's first mentioned in verse 6. Revelation 20, verse 6, says, "Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years." So there's the second death. What exactly is that? Chapter 20 and verse 14 says, "And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death." So what is the second death? Answer: It's the lake of fire. And notice verse 15: "And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire."

Now notice chapter 21 and verse 8. After talking about those who were saved, in verse 7—"I will be his God, and he shall be my son," He says in verse 8, "But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death." So Jesus tells the believers at Smyrna that if they overcome this temptation to apostatize, You will never wind up in the lake of fire. Not only will you have the crown of eternal life, you will also escape any possibility of ever winding up in the lake of fire.

So that's the second death. What's the first death? Well the answer is, the first death is when you die physically. And we all go through the first death. But the second death is when you die eternally, after the final judgment when you're cast into everlasting conscious torment in the lake of fire. That's the second death.

The first death is not to be feared. It is fixable by regeneration and by resurrection, by redemption and by resurrection. Why? Jesus has the keys to hell and death. So the point is, the first death is not to be feared, it is fixable by redemption and resurrection. But the second death is to be feared above all else, because it is irreparable and it is unchangeable and it is eternal and it is irreversible, and for it, there is no remedy ever, forever.

So this is the reason why we read things, like Hebrews 10:32 to 39. Turn in your Bible please to Hebrews chapter 10, and we'll close with this passage. Hebrews chapter 10, verses 32 to 39, the author of the book of Hebrews is saying to these Hebrew Christians to whom he's writing: Persevere in the faith. Don't turn back under persecution. He says in Hebrews 10, verse 32:

"³² But call to remembrance the former days, in which, after ye were illuminated, ye endured a great fight of afflictions." As soon as they got saved, they started being persecuted. What did the persecution look like?

Verse 33 “³³ partly, whilst ye were made a gazingstock both by reproaches and afflictions; and partly, whilst ye became companions of them that were so used. ³⁴ For ye had compassion of me in my bonds, and took joyfully the spoiling of your goods”—Any wonder why these folks were poor?—“knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance.” There’s the real riches, people.

Verse 35, here’s the response: “³⁵ Cast not away therefore your confidence” in Christ, is the idea, “which hath great recompence of reward. ³⁶ For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God,”—for ten days, for that perfect length of time that God has ordained that we live on this earth—“ye might receive the promise.” The promise of what? Eternal life and deliverance from the second death.

Verse 37: “³⁷ For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry.” Jesus is going to return. How do we live in the meantime? Verse 38: “³⁸ Now the just shall live by faith:”—they’ll believe these things and act on these things, as though it’s true because it is true —“but if any man draw back,”—there’s the one who doesn’t overcome but is overcome by the persecutors, and thus denies Christ—“my soul shall have no pleasure in him,” God says, “³⁹ But we”—Christians, we real Christians—“are not of them who draw back”—and where does drawing back lead? To perdition, the second death. But we are “of them that believe to”—where does that lead?—it leads to “the saving of the soul.”

So what the author of the book of Hebrews is saying, and what Jesus is saying is, Look. I know your suffering. I know your poverty. I know the pain you are going through because you are being faithful to me. He says, You just keep on doing it and in the end, you’ll have eternal life and you’ll escape hell. Suffering is temporary, but glory is eternal. Why then would you trade a little relief from a little bit of suffering now to have no relief from infinite suffering forever?

That’s why Paul says, The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us.” You know, the greatest suffering that any human has ever had on the face of this earth is nothing compared to the least suffering that any soul has in hell.

Therefore, do not escape temporal suffering by denying Christ, and thus making yourself liable to eternal suffering. But rather, be faithful to Christ now, knowing this suffering will end. These light afflictions are but for a moment, but they’re going to work a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory. And it is that for which we live, and with true saving faith we know that’s true, and therefore we endure.

We do what Jesus said to the Smyrnan people: Be thou faithful unto death. Just be faithful! That’s the call. He’s not saying you have to do some spectacular thing. Just keep on believing in me, no matter how they treat you. Keep on serving me, no matter how they treat you, and I will reward you beyond your wildest dreams. But don’t give up. Keep pressing on. May Christ give us the grace and strength to do so. Shall we pray together.

Father, thank you for this wonderful church and the wonderful example that it sets for us. And Father, we know that no church is perfect, but we also know that this church was not condemned, because whatever sins were in it were not dominating and not characteristic, and therefore were being dealt with on a daily basis. We read in First Peter 4 that he who has suffered has ceased from the practice of sin. So Father, we see that wherever there's great suffering, there's also great sanctification.

Father, thank you that you appoint sufferings in our lives for the perfect amount of time and to the perfect degree, never too much, never too little, just the proper amount. Thank you, Father, that your sufferings that you appoint in our lives do not destroy us, but rather they prove us and thereby obtain reward for us.

Father, thank you that Jesus is the first and the last. Thank you that He is the first begotten from the dead, and therefore we don't need to fear, for He is sovereign over all and we don't need to fear death, for He is the victor over it. May the keys in His hand of hell and death be used to deliver us into eternal life. Father, we look to Him and trust in Him for that, and may He do so for each of us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.