

Do Not Fear...

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.” ’*

Last week we looked at John’s greeting and instruction to the Church at Ephesus. As was mentioned then, there were many things about that church that were quite admirable. They stood for truth, they combatted heresy, and they even tried those who claimed to be apostles and were not. The problem in that church, was that they had left their first love. The command that was given by John to that church was to return and do the first works, and to repent. One of the things that is important for us to remember about a church that has left their first love is this was likely evidenced in the way in which they regarded one another.

John was known as the disciple that Jesus loved. We read this designation in the Gospel of John, but it was John, who repeatedly instructed and warned believers of their need to love one

another. In John 13:35 John wrote of Jesus saying: ³⁵ *“By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”*

When we read John’s epistle’s he repeatedly writes of the need for us to love one another.

1 John 2:9-11 could not be more clear: ⁹ *He who says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness until now.* ¹⁰ *He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him.* ¹¹ *But he who hates his brother is in darkness and walks in darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.*

Then of course there is our church wi-fi password. 1 John 3:16: ¹⁶ *By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.”* A church that fails to love the brethren, a church that fails to lay down their lives for the brethren is a church that has left it’s first love.

The Church at Ephesus, though they did many things right failed in that all important area of love. You cannot say that you love God, if you hate your brother. But this brings up the question of what is love? The world has an idea of love that may sound nice and it may sing about *“all we need is love.”* But then when you ask them what is love? You get goofy answers like *“love is love.”* It seems that, to the world at least, defining love is almost as difficult as defining what a woman is.

According to the Bible though, love is not a feeling. Love is not an emotion, but love finds its fulfillment in actions. Romans 13:8-10 says: ⁸ *Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law.* ⁹ *For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not bear false witness,”*

*“You shall not covet,” and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”*¹⁰ *Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.* And of course we are all familiar with 1 Corinthians 13, the love chapter where we read a description of what love is in verses 4-8: ⁴ *Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up;* ⁵ *does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil;* ⁶ *does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth;* ⁷ *bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

⁸ *Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away.*

This of course brings us to the Church in Smyrna. To the angel or messenger of the Church in Smyrna, He who is the first and the last and who was dead and is not alive writes this: *“I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich);*

We have spoken of these messages being sent to the angels of the 7 churches, and how the angel or messenger is most likely being addressed to the pastor of that church. One of the very famous pastors of the Church in Smyrna was the man Polycarp. I believe Polycarp became the pastor of this congregation after the writing of the Book of Revelation, but Polycarp’s faithfulness unto death, is a testimony to the testimony of this Church.

The City of Smyrna was named for the word myrrh, which most of us know of because of the gifts of the Magi. Myrrh was an aromatic gum resin that is bitter to the taste but sweet to the smell. It was used to embalm the dead in the first century. In John 19:39 we read that *“Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and*

aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight.” The church in Smyrna faced bitter persecution and death, yet it emitted a fragrant testimony of faithful commitment to Christ in the middle of an idolatrous society.

The city of Smyrna was located about 35 miles from Ephesus. It was located at the base of Mount Pagus, nestled between seven hills in a well-planned and protected coastal harbor on the Aegean Sea. Because of its location on the Aegean Sea and also on the Hermes River, Smyrna was a major commercial center and brought great wealth to the area that rivaled Ephesus and Pergamos.

Smyrna possessed wide, paved streets and beautiful buildings. The city was noted for its art, education, philosophy, science, school of medicine, and large library. Temples to the pagan gods Apollo, Asclepia, Aphrodite, Cybelle, Emperor Tiberius, and Zeus dotted the landscape. In A.D. 26 Rome granted Smyrna the right to erect a temple in honor of Tiberius and his mother, Julia. A golden street extended from the temple, connecting it with the others within the city.

Scripture tells us virtually nothing about the establishment of the church at Smyrna. But from what we learn here in Revelation 2 we know that the church was surrounded by a demonic system dedicated to these false Roman Gods. The Church in Smyrna is pointed to for her great testimony of faithfulness in the midst of massive pagan idolatry. Historically we know that there was much persecution of the Christians in this area.

In looking at the way Christ identified Himself to this church, He called His again referred to as the *“First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life”* ‘ This is now the fourth time Christ is identified this way in the Book of Revelation. When He is identified as the first, this is speaking of his existence before the creation of all things. When it speaks of Him as the last, this speaks of His existing into eternity, and of course Him being dead and now living is very clear, but I want us to understand the hope that this brings to the people in this church who are suffering through intense persecution. When He tells them later not to fear, He speaks not as someone who is a stranger to their trials, but as one who has already been there and who has overcome.

There is also in here a declaration of His Divinity, He is God because He is the First and the Last and was alive at this time. The Lord's words were a great encouragement to the believers in Smyrna, many of whom were being martyred for their faith.

Now, one of the interesting things about this Church, there is not a word of condemnation directed toward them, in fact, of the 7 churches in Asia, it is only Smyrna and Philadelphia that are spared condemnation. I think something else that is interesting here is the fact that there is no condemnation is somewhat surprising to the church. I only say this because of the parenthetical statement to the church. Jesus says, *"I know your works, tribulation, and poverty, (but you are rich)."*

Not unlike today, there was a notion by many that outward prosperity and appearance was a sign of God's favor. It is true that there are promises of blessing to the faithful throughout the pages of Scripture, but the faithful are also warned that all who live Godly lives in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. How do these two seemingly opposing statements work together? Smyrna knew their tribulation, they knew their poverty; being a member of a persecuted class in the City of Smyrna meant that they did not participate in many of the benefits of wealth that the City offered, and yet Jesus tells them, essentially, "you think you are poor, but you are rich."

Now it is also in the address to the Church at Smyrna that a certain group is called out and this group is identified as blasphemers who say they are Jews are not, but instead they are a synagogue of Satan. This phrase is of course addressed to the faithful members of the Church in Smyrna, about a group that is causing them all kinds of problems. We will talk about these guys in a little bit, but try and imagine the reaction you would get today addressing a group as a synagogue of Satan. And then remember that this is Jesus calling them this.

In verse 10 Jesus tells them: 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."*

There is a tendency amongst many modern readers of the Scripture to think that Jesus will always deliver us from our trials. Now, in an ultimate sense this is true, however here, His warning to them is not to fear what it is they are preparing to go through. In fact the word he uses is “suffer.” He tells them that the devil is going to throw some of them into prison that they would be tested, and then he tells them they will have tribulation for 10 days. He then tells them to be faithful until death and then they would receive the crown of life.

Earlier in the Book we saw that John was their brother and companion in the tribulation. We already spoke about how this was a reference to that period of tribulation that Jesus specifically warned about. Some have called it “the Great Tribulation.” Here we see the members of the church of Smyrna are undergoing tribulation which refers to the way that believer in Smyrna were suffering because of their commitment to Christ. Their commitment was a commitment that refused to compromise even in the face of persecution.

Christians in Smyrna were persecuted in multiple ways. First of all they were persecuted politically because they would not worship Caesar as god. In fact we will see that this persecution was ongoing for some time in Smyrna. Polycarp and many others were martyred because of their unwillingness to make the simple declaration that Caesar was Lord. Second, these Christians suffered abject poverty because of persecution. The declaration that Caesar was lord was so central to all of life in this society that to not say it was to be labeled an outcast, and yet these Christians suffered not only physical torture and death for their refusal they also found themselves very much on the outside because of this refusal. Yet they were “rich” in Christ’s love and had abundant spiritual blessings and great scriptural encouragement.

Third, these believers they suffered religious persecution through “blasphemy.” This blasphemy likely took the form of slander. Much of what this entails is probably spelled out in many of the conversations that Jesus had with the Jewish leaders during His ministry. It is in the Gospel of John where we see some of the most heated and direct exchanges between Jesus and those who claimed to be the leaders of the Jews. In John 5:46 Jesus is responding to the Jews who are

speaking to him telling him that they believe Moses and Jesus says: ⁴⁶ *For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me.* Many of us read very sloppily, or we are so blinded by tradition we miss what this text is saying. He is telling them that they claim to believe Moses, but if they did they would believe me. By implication, since they don't believe Jesus, they don't believe Moses. Later, in John 8 they claim that they are children of Abraham. Listen to Jesus speaking to them in John 8:37: ³⁷ *"I know that you are Abraham's descendants, but you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you. ³⁸ I speak what I have seen with My Father, and you do what you have seen with your father."*

³⁹ *They answered and said to Him, "Abraham is our father."*

Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would do the works of Abraham. ⁴⁰ But now you seek to kill Me, a Man who has told you the truth which I heard from God. Abraham did not do this. ⁴¹ You do the deeds of your father."

Jesus concedes that they are physically descended from Abraham, but he claims that they have a different father. And He claims this because they do not believe in Jesus. Now, this is not a hidden teaching in the New Testament, in fact, it is everywhere apparent. Jesus goes on to tell those who would not hear Him that they were of their father the devil. John emphasizes this point, here in our text by identifying these unbelieving Jews as a synagogue of Satan. This synagogue of Satan in fact is behind much of the persecution against the early Christians. This persecution is carried out in large part through slander and lying about what it is the Christians believed.

Now when something like this is said, it is necessary to explain what exactly is being said. In Deuteronomy 18:18-19 Moses writes these words from the Lord: ¹⁸ *I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him.* ¹⁹ *And it shall be that whoever will not hear My words, which He speaks in My name, I will require it of him.*

Here the Lord proclaims that one day...God will raise up a prophet from amongst the people of Israel, and He will put His words in the mouth of that prophet, and that prophet will speak all that I command Him to speak. He then goes on to say that whoever does not hear those words the Lord will require it of them. The question then is if Jesus is that prophet, and He is, then what is the state of those who reject Jesus. John answers it here when he says they claim to be Jews but are not. They claim to be the seed of Abraham, and in reality, by their practice they have rejected Abraham, they have rejected Moses, and they have rejected ultimately Messiah. They are a synagogue of Satan. I want to say this and I know it is not a popular statement, but it is the truth. There is no such thing as a faithful Jew who rejects Jesus Christ.

Smyrna was home to a large Jewish population. According to what the text says, Satan used this to hinder and trouble the church. This is the reason they are referred to as a “synagogue of Satan.”

Fourth, we know that the believer in Smyrna suffered physical persecution. The Lord in fact allowed Satan to incarcerate some of the Christians in Smyrna to test them for “ten days.” This ten days is an issue that is often discussed when the Church in Smyrna is talked about. The commentaries list 4 basic positions on this tribulation. Some hold that this means 10 literal days. Some claim that this has to do with the 10 major Roman persecutions that took place during the

first 250 years of the Church. Those who hold to a later date for the writing of the Book equate the 10 days to a 10 year persecution that was instituted by the Emperor Diocletian, and another view is that the number 10 is a symbolic number which signifies a complete and yet brief period of tribulation.

I want to say that I believe the textual evidence indicates that this was a 10 day period just like it says. The reason I say this is because listen to this statement:

Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days.

A warning that some of you are about to be thrown into prison would lose it's meaning if it was speaking about lengthy periods of persecution. I would like to quote Philip Kayser on this point:

"I see this as proof that God was protecting the church of Smyrna during the Great Tribulation because of its faithfulness. Let me explain: the Great Tribulation started in 62 AD, really heated up after the fire in Rome in 64 AD, and if this book was written in 66 AD, then there would be another two years of tribulation that most of the churches faced - a total of six. It almost wiped out churches in other areas. But Smyrna was largely spared. Though they had suffered from vandalism and looting and were poor as a result, they had not yet faced death like some churches had. So here is my take - rather than facing six years of tribulation that some of the other churches had, they would only have a ten day period of intense testing. So there is a degree of protection. The enemy cannot bring one day more of persecution than what God allows Satan to bring. Satan is on a leash. That's encouraging."

“Sometimes the Lord calms the storm. Sometimes he lets the storm rage and calms his child.” Here God does both. He limits the amount of storm that the church would face, but he calms their hearts through it all.’

The address to Smyrna concludes with these words:

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.

His commendation to this Church is that they should not be afraid. The reason they need not fear is because in spite of the tribulation that they are going through, Jesus has conquered death. No true believer in Jesus will be harmed by the second death. In Matthew 10:28 Jesus says: ²⁸ *And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.* In Revelation 20 we are told what the second death is. Listen to verses 11-15:

¹¹ *Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them.* ¹² *And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books.* ¹³ *The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works.* ¹⁴ *Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.* ¹⁵ *And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.*

As I close, I would like to briefly give to you the account of the martyrdom of the faithful saint of God Polycarp, who as we mentioned earlier was the pastor at Smyrna.

According to early church records Polycarp was a disciple of John. Jerome wrote that John ordained Polycarp as the Bishop of Smyrna. When Polycarp was arrested for refusing to burn incense to the Roman Emperor he was resting upstairs in a country home. The soldiers came to the home fully armed as if they were arresting a dangerous criminal. Polycarp's friends wanted to sneak him out, but he refused, saying, "God's will be done." (The Christians there taught that a believer was not to make oneself available for martyrdom and should not seek it out, but neither should he/she avoid it when there was no choice.)

Polycarp clearly had listened to the words of Jesus not to be afraid for when they came, he welcomed his captors as if they were friends. He talked with them and ordered that food and drink be served to them. Then Polycarp made one request. He requested one hour to pray before they took him away. The officers overhearing his prayers (that went on for two hours) began to have second thoughts. What were they doing arresting an old man like this?

After carrying him to the place of judgment he was asked to recant of his refusal and here are the words that he said: *"Eighty and six years I have served Him, and He has done me no wrong."*

This could indicate either that he was then eighty-six years old or that he had lived eighty-six years after his conversion. Polycarp goes on to say: *"How then can I blaspheme my King and Savior? You threaten me with a fire that burns for a season, and after a little while is quenched; but you are ignorant of the fire of everlasting punishment that is prepared for the wicked."* Polycarp was burned at the stake and ran through with a spear for refusing to burn

incense to the Roman Emperor. On his farewell, he said: "I bless you, Father, for judging me worthy of this hour, so that in the company of the martyrs I may share the cup of Christ."

Polycarp is one example of the Christians in Smyrna and how they underwent brutal persecution and tribulation but throughout their trials they displayed great faith in Christ. They were materially poor, yet they were rich in spiritual blessings. Because of their faithful commitment to Christ, this church was truly full of overcomers.

Christians today who undergo trials for their faith can glean encouragement, strength, and comfort from the testimony of this church. The Lord challenges each reader to take this message to heart and "*hear what the Spirit says.*" It is a message each of us must heed.