

Smyrna: The Faithful Church Revelation 2:8-11

My friend Philip Moore is a church planter/pastor in Paris, France. He is a wonderful expositor and a man of much grace, originally from Ireland.

When Phillip (who speaks fluent French) was considering moving to Paris to plant a church, he had an unforgettable conversation with one of his friends, who is also an Irishman ministering in France. Philip describes him as an intense man, who can't do two things at once. As they were walking, the friend stopped and looked Philip in the eye and said, "Philip, if you are not prepared to suffer for the gospel, then please don't come to France. We've got enough people in France *pretending*. But if you're not prepared to suffer, then stay where you are."

This forced Philip to come face to face with the question that the church in Smyrna had to answer (and indeed every Christian must ask):

Are we prepared to suffer for the gospel?

- **When you hold to the claims of the gospel, you will face opposition.**
 - Jesus ended his last beatitude pronouncing a blessing on all who are persecuted, saying, "rejoice and be glad for great is your reward in heaven." (Matt 5:12)
- **When you pursue a life of godliness, you will suffer (2 Tim 3:12).**
- **It's not that we pursue suffering, or that we have a martyr complex.**

We are to pursue obedience to Jesus, and we should be ready for opposition when we do.

The opposition can come in many forms: **verbal, relational, judicial or physical.**

The theme of the letter to Smyrna is about suffering for the gospel as obedient Xians.

It's very relevant for subject for Xians today.

- **If you live out your faith, there are some jobs you won't get.**
- **Church planters often find it difficult to rent space in various parts of the world.**
- **Teenagers know that they will get mocked for following Jesus.**
- **In certain countries, if you don't recognize the state religion, you will be seen as outsider, as strange, or as a problem to be dealt with.**

Persecution isn't something that only happened in the past. It's happening today. I was on a phone call just Wednesday with A29; Church in Hard Places, and during prayer time heard about a recent evident in Asia, as the church plant was raided. All the attenders were questioned, etc. Action will be taken, and so we pray for them.

Heb. 13:3 “Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body” (Heb 13:3)

1 Corinthians 12:26. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

One of the more striking things about suffering for the gospel is found in Phil 1:29, “For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.” (1:29-30) . Did you catch that? It has been “granted to you” (it’s a gift) to not only believe (which is also a gift) but to suffer.

You **get** to suffer for the sake of Christ.

Acts 5:40-41:

... and when they had called the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.”

Jesus told them that they would suffer but they had not suffered physically until now. Now they’d been good and flogged, and it’s almost like they were relieved that Jesus’ word came true, which meant they were being faithful to his commission. So they are filled with joy.

If love is the first mark of a vibrant church (Ephesus), we might say that suffering is the second, since suffering is the inevitable result of true love for Christ.

- One is willing to suffer for the one he/she loves.

Smyrna is the church of impending suffering because of their love for Christ.

Notice the **change of tone** in this particular letter.

- There is not one word of rebuke or criticism.
- They are following the way of the Master, out of devotion to the Master.

Polycarp, famous martyr, was a bishop of Smyrna about 60 years after John wrote this. In around 156, he would be arrested, quickly charged, and martyred.

- He was discipled by John the Apostle.
- Prompted by Jewish opposition, he was threatened with death for not worshipping the Emperor.
- It is very probable that he read this letter, was threatened, and was put to death.
- If fact, he went through every step of this letter.

#1: The Authoritative Introduction (2:8)

A. Address – Angel of church in Smyrna (1:18)

Smyrna

(Pics)

- It may have been the most culturally sophisticated city, & was one of the most prosperous.
- It was located about 35 miles north of Ephesus, and was a great rival of Ephesus.
- It was renowned for its civic pride and beauty and called itself “first in Asia.”
- It was est. 1,000 years before Christ.
- **It was the first city to erect a temple to the goddess Roma and in AD 26 because of its loyalty to Rome; it beat out ten other cities to build a temple to emperor Tiberius (Osborne). Smyrna was devoted to Rome and emperor worship.**
- It was destroyed in 600 BC, but Alexander the Great commissioned that it be rebuilt, and it was in 290BC.
- **It had been raised to life.**
- They identified with the “phoenix” – the symbol of resurrection.
- **It was rebuilt closer to the harbor, and its architecture made it one of the most pleasing cities in Asia: famous temples (the temples of Zeus and Cybele were connected by a mall that was the envy of the ancient world), a group of buildings called “the crown of Smyrna,” an acropolis on Mount Pagos, and a beautiful roadway called “the Street of Gold” (Osborne)**
- **It had a large Jewish population that opposed Christians.**
- The church was most likely founded through Paul’s 2 ½ year ministry in Ephesus.

B. The words of ... “**The first and the last, who died and came to life again.**”

Church in Smyrna needed to know all of these truths about Christ:

“**The first and the last**”

- *Protos kai ho eschatos.*
- This is a title for Christ throughout the book (1:17; 2:8; 22:13) and is connected to Alpha and Omega.
- Christ is sovereign over history.
- He is in control of past and future and all things exist for him.
- He is of first importance, first in glory. He is preeminent.
- He is the eternal one, and he guarantees the victory of his suffering saints.
- The First and Last is watching over his church.

He “**died and came to life.**”

- Past tense – these things happened in history.
- You can **hear 1:18** in this statement.
- **Like the city of Smyrna, the city of the resurrection, Christ rose again.**
- **While the opposition may take one’s present life, Jesus guarantees our future life.**

Notice how relevant Christology is!

- **We need a good theology of suffering, centered on Christ if we are to suffer well.**

#2: The All-Knowing Evaluation (2:9)

Only the church at Philadelphia has strengths with no weaknesses mentioned!

- **What is interesting is that both of them are small!**
- They were the two least significant churches in terms of numbers and influence
- That's important to keep in mind: the church that Jesus approves of is not always the church that people are drawn to.
 - **It is more important to be faithful than famous.**
 - This doesn't mean only small churches are faithful and big churches are not; no, you can have unfaithful small churches and faithful large churches.
- The question is: is the church faithful to Christ and his word?

"I know"

- He knows everything about the church.
- He knows their present situation in Smyrna.
- Three particular things he knows: **"tribulation, poverty and slander."**

When you experience opposition because of Jesus Christ you may be inclined to ask, **"Where are you?" He knows!**

A. Tribulation

- **Every trade guild (or union) had a patron deity; but Christians couldn't honor them.**
- They were also to worship the Emperor, something they couldn't do either.
- The only other religion tolerated was the Jewish faith.
 - At times, Christians were considered to be **Jewish sect and therefore safe.**
 - **But the Christians began to grow in popularity, and the Jews who rejected Jesus, were jealous of the Christians' popularity.**
 - In Acts, Jewish **"jealousy"** led to the persecution of Xians (Acts 5:17)
 - Most of the persecution against the churches in Acts came from Jews.
- So the Jews told the Romans, **"They're not real Jews."**
- The authorities would then punish them.

This **explains verse 9b** — **"Jews, who are not, but are of the synagogue of Satan."**

- Jesus says "they are not Jews" because they have not accepted him as Messiah.
- The Christians are the real Jews. (**Rom 2:28-29**; John 8:31-47)

Rom 2:28–29: "For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God."

- Strong language: "Synagogue of Satan."
- Who is Satan? He is the **accuser** of Christians.
- When the Jews were doing this, they were of the synagogue of Satan.

B. Poverty

- They were destitute in a prosperous city.
- They had lost jobs and possessions over their faith.
- Some probably refused to do business with them.
- They may have had their homes pillaged (Heb 10:34).

“But you are rich.”

- If you suffer for the gospel, you are rich; it’s not a curse from God, it’s a blessing of God.
- Notice the contrast with **Laodicea**: rich materially but poor spiritually. (3:14-22)

To know the love of God is to be rich! To have the indwelling Spirit is to be rich! To have the righteousness of Jesus Christ is to be rich! To inherit the earth is to be rich!

It’s like marriage; when many of us got married we had no money to speak of (my father-in-law laughed at us) but it doesn’t matter when you’re in love!

“You can take the world but give me Jesus” is the song of the saint.

We want to look at those who are striving after worldly wealth but have no Christ, “over-rated, over-rated.” The real riches are found in knowing Christ JEsus.

If you have it all, but not Jesus, you will end up in Ecclesiastes: All is vanity!

- Jesus is not a means to an end — he is the end.
- Jesus is not the means of fulfilling your dream — he is the dream.
- We don’t pursue JEsus for something else; we pursue him because his steadfast love is better than life.

- **“as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.”** (2Cor6).
- That’s ministry — I many not have much in the world’s eyes but I’m making people truly rich.

Mark 10:29-30

²⁹ Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, ³⁰ who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.

In spite of your afflictions, God will give you spiritual riches beyond your wildest dreams, now and in the aged to come! (cf., Phil 3:10-11)

C. Slander

- Ethnic Jews opposed them and were spreading rumors about them.
- In Smyrna, the Jews instigated the legal action in the Roman courts against the Christians.

“Synagogue of Satan” – they were one with the adversary in opposing the church.

This is not a verse to justify anti-semitism.

- John doesn't say all Jews are of Satan.
- Remember, John is Jewish!
- But these particular individuals in this particular instance were in league with Satan, as they slandered the Christians, and made false accusations

Jesus called Satan “the father of lies” and they were under his influence.

- Notice how Satan works: through the agency of people.
- The battle is not with flesh and blood... it's spiritual, and the attack usually comes through human beings under the influence of the accuser.

Around the world today, Christians still deal with these types of persecution: tribulation, poverty, and slander... and in verse 10, one more is mentioned: **prison.**

A pastor friend told a story recently of a young man who became a Christian through the ministry of a church plant north of the Ivory Coast that is seeking to reach an unreached peoples. The locals despised the fact that he became a Christian (he was formerly a Muslim). So every week when he would walk to church, the villagers would burn his fields. He would have to come back and replant and rework his fields. The person telling the story said, “The villagers got fed of burning up his fields before he got fed up going to church. So he outlasted them.”

That's a very real story about persecution.

(As a funny side note, my friend Adam (an Australian) misheard this story due to the accent of my pastor friend, and told it to his congregation this way: “Every week they would burn his feet [not fields] but he would just keep going to church every week” That's quite a story and a miracle)!

It is hard being a Christian in many countries, and it's easy for us to forget this.

- “Subconsciously, the idea of comfort and security as a right is so ingrained in our Western psyche that, deep down, most of us expect to serve the Lord at no personal cost at all.-- Sanchez, Juan

But our faith will lead to some measure of suffering if we are not hiding our witness.

- So the person who has not suffered, needs to ask those questions: Am I hiding my light under a bushel?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor, was tried and hung by direct order in a German concentration camp on April 9, 1945. He wrote:

Suffering then is the badge of the true Christian. The disciple is not above his master... Luther reckoned suffering among the marks of the true church.... Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ, and it is therefore not surprising that Christians should be called upon to suffer.

And today, in China, Nepal, various parts of Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere, Christians are facing great opposition. But they aren't alone in it...

#3: The Appropriate Exhortation (2:10)

A. The Imperative: “Don't be afraid” ... “for what you're about to suffer” (10a)

- Not if you suffer, but what you are about to suffer
- It's very forceful in Greek: “**Stop being afraid.**”

A biblical theme: not fearing in suffering (Ps. 46:1ff; Matt 10:28; 11:27; 13:3, 6; 1 Pet 3:14-15; 4:12-14; 19).

- “When I am afraid, I trust in you” (Ps 56:3)
- **Psalm 23**: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no living” (This Psalm is not so much about dying, as it is living!)
- “By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible” (Heb 11:27)

In the midst of tribulation, the church is to be fearless witnesses (1:2; 9; 6:9; 12:9-12).

- Remember this when you bear witness locally. (Acts 4:29-31)
- Remember this, should the Lord call you overseas.
- Remember this, should you be asked to plant a church in a dangerous place: Don't be afraid...

Heb 13:5–6: I will never leave you nor forsake you.” So we can confidently say,
“The Lord is my helper;
I will not fear;
what can man do to me?”

B. The Enemy: Satan (10b) “Satan is about to throw some of you in prison”

- Behind all enemies is “**Satan.**” (“Love the captive, rage against the Captor”).
- There is this one who hates us.
- When we are slandered, who is behind it: the *diabolos*.

C. The Type of Suffering: Prison (10c)

- Many Christians have seen the inside of a prison (beginning with the apostles)
- **John Bunyan, over 300 years ago, stayed in prison for 12 years for conscience sake. He could have gotten out if he had agreed not to preach the gospel (Piper). He had a wife and four small children, one of whom was blind. (Ibid)**

For us, prison is a place for us that you go after being condemned.

- But in this context, prison was a place of **coercion**; or **detention for an impending trial or impending execution**; it might involve torture and other shameful practices.
- “Smyrna, You will be put in prison; tortured, and perhaps condemned to die.”

D. The Sovereign Purpose: “This is that you may be tested” (10d)

- Satan’s design was to sift them like wheat (Lk 22:31).
- But God has his purposes.
- Satan tempts to destroy; but God tests to refine.
- We don’t always know the details of God’s sovereign purposes, but we know the general purpose: to make us like Christ.

This testing here involved whether or not they will renounce Jesus.

- Are we okay with a God who tests us? Are you okay with that?
- That’s what’s promised from the beginning to end of the Bible.
 - Recall Genesis 22:1, all the patriarchs tested;
 - the people of God were tested in the wilderness;
 - all the prophets of God were tested;
 - Jesus was tested in the wilderness;
 - all the apostles were tested; we are all tested.

² Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴ And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1.2-4)

D. The Extent of Suffering: “For Ten days you will have tribulation” (10e)

This period is limited in time.

- God will make sure it’s not endless, but it will be terrible nonetheless.
- Again, we see God is sovereign over it.

So put all this together:

- You will suffer.
- But I’m sovereign over it’s duration.
- I’m sovereignly working out my purposes through it.
- You don’t have to be afraid; I know your situation and I’m with you.

E. The Word to them (and the message of Revelation): “Be Faithful Until Death” (10f)

- Be faithful unto physical death.
 - Talk with Steve: “Faithful to the end” that’s my ambition.
- For some Christians, it will mean **small acts of obedience for a long life.**
- For others, it may mean **dying for the faith.**
- This is a requirement for being a pastor in a place like Turkey: willingness to suffer and maybe dying. As one pastor friend exhorted them last month: **“I know some of you pastors in Turkey have been threatened with death. Be faithful until the point of death. If you are the wife of the pastors, you want him to be faithful until the point of death. If you are a church member, you should want this too.”**

F. The Promise: Crown of Life (10g)

- This is the gift.

- The metaphor from the church in Ephesus has changed from the tree of life (this glorious paradise) to a victor's crown who wins the race.
- Smyrna was known for athletic games and so this is a good metaphor.

“They may take your life, but I will give you the crown of life.”

- The reward is for those who finish; not those who just start.
- The Christian life is like a race: hard, requires training and perseverance.
- But at the end of the Champion of all Champions, Jesus Christ, who has a crown of life to give to every conqueror!
- Keep your eyes on the prize.

#4: The Awe-Inspiring Conclusion (2:11)

What was stated positively (I will give you the crown of life) is now stated negatively: **“you will not be hurt by the second death”**

This is only for the *overcomers*.

- Not hurt at all by the second death.
- Jesus says, “Don’t fear death. I have defeated death” and you won’t be hurt by it.
- Three other references to second death: lake of fire, eternal death (20:6, 14; 21:8).
- Those who are faithful don’t have to fear this!

John Stott on Polycarp’s Martyrdom:

It was February 2, probably in the year A.D. 156. The venerable bishop, who had fled from the city at the pleading of his congregation, was tracked down to his hiding-place. He made no attempt to flee. Instead he offered food and drink to his captors and asked permission to retire for prayer, which he did for two hours.

Then as they traveled into the city, the officer in charge urged him to recant. “What harm can it do,” he asked, “to sacrifice to the emperor?” Polycarp refused. On arrival, he was roughly pushed out of the carriage, and brought before the proconsul in the amphitheater, who addressed him: “Respect your years!... Swear by the genius of Caesar....” And again, “Swear, and I will release you; revile Christ!” To which Polycarp replied: “For 86 years I have served him, and he has done me no wrong: how then can I blaspheme my king who saved me?” The proconsul persisted: “Swear by the genius Caesar.... I have wild beasts; if you will not change your mind, I will throw you to them....” “Call them,” Polycarp replied. “Since you make light of the beast, I will have you destroyed by fire, unless you change your attitude.”

Angry Jews and Gentiles then gathered the wood for the pile. Polycarp stood by the stake, asking not to be fastened to it, and prayed, “O Lord, Almighty God, the Father of your beloved Son Jesus Christ, through whom we have come to know you ... I thank you for counting me worthy this day and hour of sharing the cup of Christ among the number of your martyrs.” The fire

was lit but as the wind drove the flames away from him and prolonged the suffering, a soldier put an end to his misery with a sword.

Polycarp: Tribulation, poverty, slander, martyrdom.

- **Faithful to death.**
- **He was a conqueror, through Christ.**
- **He received the crown of life.**
- **He was not hurt by the second death.**

**For he followed the way of Christ, which is not just the path of suffering;
it is also the path to resurrection and glory.**

Do not fear, keep following Jesus.

**He hasn't promised us that it will be easy, but he promises to be with us, and
afterward receive us the crown of glory.**