

REVELATION

Part 4: “To Smyrna”

Revelation 2:8–11

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Summary

In this sermon, we will explore the topic of persecution faced by Christians, drawing inspiration from Revelation 2:8–11 and the experiences of the church in Smyrna. We'll delve into historical examples of severe persecution, including the courageous story of Saint Polycarp of Smyrna (A.D. 69–155). Discover Christ's message of encouragement amidst suffering and his promise of eternal reward for faithful endurance.

Scripture Reading

“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. ‘I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that 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 throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. 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. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death’” (Revelation 2:8–11, ESV).

Introduction

Today, I want to begin with a question: how would you define the word “*persecution*”?

Persecution is one of those words that can mean different things to different people. But I can tell you for sure what it does *not* mean.

Persecution is not when Christians experience mere inconvenience in a world that does not share their beliefs or practices. Persecution is not living in a world where the Christian way of life does not receive special privileges or treatment. Persecution is not when a non-Christian says or does something that annoys or offends Christians.

Those experiences are just standard features of Christians living as exiles in a world that is not our true home. And we *should* be different than and distinct from the world around us. And we should experience a sense of *tension* that that difference creates.

But I do not think we should call such tension “*persecution*.” Actual Christian persecution is when believers are forced to endure active hostility, abuse, and ill-treatment for their Christian faith.

And when we misapply the term persecution, it runs the risk of diminishing and dishonoring the very real persecution that is happening right now among many of our Christian brothers and sisters around the world. In fact, from a numeric standpoint, there are more Christians enduring persecution right now than at any other moment in history.

Are there Americans in America who suffer unjustly because of their faith? Certainly, there are.

But when I think of modern-day persecution, I think of the remnant of Assyrian Christians, who were intentionally targeted, crushed, murdered, and driven from their homeland by ISIS.

I think of the estimated 70,000 thousand Christians who are currently imprisoned under the brutal regime of North Korea.

I think of the churches in China whose buildings have been bulldozed into dust because they refused to hang a portrait of the president of China in their sanctuary.

I think of a church-planting pastor that we support in India, where Hindu nationalism is on the rise, and how he and other Christians have experienced suspicion and hostility from the state.

I think of the Palestinian Christians in Gaza, who endure hostility, rejection, and mistrust from their Muslim neighbors while at the same time worshipping Christ in the rubble of war [show [Church in Gaza](#)].

I think of the many Christian refugees in Amarillo who were forced to flee countries like Myanmar or else face extermination because of their faith.

Maybe you could never fathom what it would be like to be a part of a church that completely lacks material resources and social standing and constantly endures violent threats and intimidation from the outside world. But for millions of Christians today, that is their *normative* experience.

If you right now had the opportunity to speak to such a Christian, living in such a context, what would you want to say to encourage them? More importantly, what would you imagine that *Jesus* would say to such a church?

The words we find in today's Scripture reading are Christ's exact words for such a church.

The Apostle John is beholding a vision of Jesus Christ in glory, and the Lord commands John to write down messages for the seven churches of Asia. And today's passage is Jesus's message to the church of Smyrna.

But as we will see, these words are not meant only for an ancient congregation in Asia Minor. Through these words, the Holy Spirit speaks to *all* "the churches" (2:11), especially those who have suffered and will suffer for their faith.

1.) The Church of Smyrna

Smyrna is located in the modern-day metropolis of Izmir [show **Izmir**], which is currently the third largest city in modern-day Turkey. It's a beautiful city, nestled underneath the shadow of Mount Pagos and along the coast of the Aegean Sea.

This area is one of those deeply ancient places in the world where humans have settled for thousands of years. However, the city of Smyrna itself was said to have been founded by Alexander the Great.

Today, if you visit Smyrna, you will find a surprising mix of ancient and modern [show **Agora Ruins of Smyrna**]. In fact, the marble colonnade of the old agora (or public market) is right next to a modern-day parking garage.

When the Apostle John was writing the book of Revelation, near the end of the first century, the city of Smyrna was known for its unflinching faithfulness and allegiance to Rome. In fact, Smyrna even housed a temple to the goddess Roma, the goddess who represented the spiritual embodiment of the Roman empire.

This is a critical truth to realize about the context in which the New Testament was written—Rome wanted more than political loyalty. Rome wanted to be loved and feared. Rome wanted to be viewed as the ultimate power and authority of the world. At a functional level, Rome wanted to be *worshipped*. And the city of Smyrna was willing to give Rome that worship as a way to stay in the good graces of the empire.

However, not all in Smyrna would bend the knee in worship to Rome. Against all the pressure and powers of the world, there was a small community of people whose highest allegiance was to Christ alone. That community was *the church of Smyrna*.

But the faith of the church of Smyrna was a *costly* faith. For in the world of Rome, to fail to worship Rome and the idols of this world meant losing all social stature and privileges. Sometimes, it meant losing wealth and your ability to make an income. Sometimes, it even meant losing your life. That was happening in Smyrna.

Moreover, the Christians in Smyrna seems to have also been the victim of "slander" (βλασφημίαν) by their Jewish neighbors (2:9). The early Christians were being actively maligned and lied about with false accusations that are designed to wound and destroy.

Now, why was the Jewish community in Smyrna so against the Christians of Smyrna?

Well, it is important to know that in the very earliest days of Christianity, the most vocal and hostile adversaries of the church were Jewish religious leaders who rejected Jesus. They saw the early Christian movement as a heretical sect of Judaism that needed to be crushed out of existence.

Christians, after all, saw their faith not as a new religion but a fulfillment of all the promises made to Israel by the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They believed that Jesus was and is the Messiah, God's anointed liberator king who has brought forth the kingdom of God. They believed that the proclamation of God's kingdom was for peoples of all nations and that because of Jesus's victory over death, people could become a part of God's people regardless of ethnicity or cultural customs. All they needed to do was trust—to place their faith—in Jesus.

However, the vast majority of Jewish religious leaders rejected Jesus as the Messiah. They were outraged that gentiles from unclean nations claimed to be a part of God's people without observing the rituals of the Old Testament law. And as a result, many Jewish leaders didn't just reject the gospel. They wanted to destroy the gospel, and they were willing to defame anyone who spoke it or believed it.

That's why in the book of Acts, there are so many instances when Jewish leaders go out of their way to harm Christian leaders like the Apostle Paul. For example, Acts 14 tells us of a time when Jews were willing to travel to different cities just so they could try to murder Paul.

So, too, the everyday Christians of Smyrna are constantly fighting complaints and false charges being filed against them by Jewish leaders. The Jews hoped to pressure the church of Smyrna to abandon their allegiance to Jesus and forsake their claim to being part of the people of God.

But Christ tells his church that it is their Jewish persecutors who are not God's people. As verse 9 tells us, these bullies are only "*those who say that they are Jews and are not*" (2:9). Through their violence, cruelty, and slander, these adversaries are proving that they are *not* part of the synagogue of the Lord but rather the "*synagogue of Satan*" (2:9).

What the Christians of Smyrna are enduring is not only suffering; it's *unjust* suffering that is spiritually charged.

Have you ever been the victim of unjust punishment? Have you ever felt powerless to defend yourself? Has your name ever been slandered by someone who hated you? Have you ever suffered because you were faithful to Jesus rather than caving into the pressure around you? That is what is happening to Smyrna at an extreme scale.

But Revelation is about an unveiling. It is a book designed to teach the early Christians and Christians of all ages how to see what the rest of the world cannot see. And in his

words to the church of Smyrna, Christ has invited us to see that suffering for his name is not a curse but a blessing.

As Jesus once taught during his earthly ministry, *“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven....”* (Matt 5:10–12a).

2.) Christ’s Encouragement for the Church of Smyrna

To those who are suffering unjustly, to those who have been slandered and lied about, to those who endure hostility for the sake of the gospel, Christ says *I know you, and I see you.*

Look again at verse 8, *“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. ‘I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich)...’”* (Rev 2:8–9a).

In the midst of pain, Christ lifts the veil to reveal what is true in the Spirit. He says, *“I know you are poor in the eyes of the world, but you are rich with the wealth of heaven. I know you feel helpless and weak, but the God of infinite power and might is your defender and Redeemer. I know you have been slandered, but I know what is true and I will be your vindication. I know you are suffering now, but I am the beginning and the end—and the end of your story is glory.”*

Yet, Christ also tells the church of Smyrna that even though they have already suffered, a time of great testing is yet to come, and they must endure and remain faithful in the fire.

Jesus tells his people, *“Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation”* (Rev 2:10a)

What is does this reference to “ten days” mean, you may wonder?

Well, remember, in Revelation, virtually every number carries symbolic value. And in the Jewish mindset, the number ten is often connected to times of testing and trial. Thus, there were ten plagues in the book Exodus, during which the children of Israel were tested (Exod 7–12). Before his time of testing and trial, Job had ten children (Job 1:2). When the prophet Malachi called the people of God to give ten percent of their income and wealth, he called it a test (Mal 3:10).

So, too, the church of Smyrna will soon endure a time of intense tribulation, during which their faith would be refined by fire. And sometimes, that fire was not a metaphor but a very literal reality.

Soon after Revelation was written, the emperors of Rome enacted a policy that required all citizens and residents of the empire to come before a civil magistrate, make a sacrifice of incense, and confess that Caesar was Lord. This was to be an act that would show who was loyal to the empire and who could not be trusted.

For most people in Roman society, this was a non-issue. Even if they worshipped other gods or goddesses, they had no problem taking an oath and making a sacrifice to Caesar as well. It was viewed as a simple act of patriotism, no more controversial than pledging allegiance to the flag.

But for Christians, this created a crisis of conscience. Christians were more than willing to submit to the emperor (1 Pet 2:13), honor the emperor (Rom 13:7), and even pray for the emperor (1 Tim 2:1–2). But they were not willing to view Caesar as a god. And they would not acknowledge him as Lord—because only Jesus is Lord.

For Rome, this created their own crisis. How could the empire possibly tolerate a group of people who refused to call Caesar Lord and instead worshipped another Lord who was put to death Rome on a cross?

It's in this historical situation that we find one of the most famous stories of early Christian history—the story of a man named *Polycarp* (A.D. 69–155) [show **Polycarp**].

Polycarp was a direct disciple of the Apostle John. He sat under John's teaching and followed in his footsteps as a follower of Jesus. At the time Revelation was written, Polycarp was only a young man. But as he grew older, he would go on to become a bishop (or the leading pastor) of a church in Asia Minor. And where was Polycarp's church? It was in the city of *Smyrna*.

As an elderly man in his late eighties, Polycarp, the pastor of the church of Smyrna, was deeply respected and loved by many in his community. But he was also a problem for the local Roman officials because he refused to pay homage to Caesar's divinity. As a result, they simply could not allow such a popular public figure to live in open defiance of the empire.

So, the order was given to arrest Polycarp. At first, church members tried to hide the old pastor and move him from place to place to evade capture. But eventually, Polycarp refused to run anymore.

When he was eventually discovered in the home of fellow Christians, the law enforcement officers who were sent to arrest him marveled at the old man's dignity and grace. Polycarp even kindly requested that those who had hosted him would now prepare a meal to feed his captors. After a time of prayer, when it was time to depart, Polycarp did not resist his arrest.

He was then led to an amphitheater where gladiator matches and battles with beasts were being held as entertainment. And there, he was brought before a Roman magistrate who demanded that the old man publicly renounce Christ and acknowledge

the divinity—or what the Romans called the “genius”—of Caesar. Otherwise, he would feed Polycarp to the beasts or burn him with fire as entertainment for the masses.

Here is how the ancient historian Eusebius recounts this moment, *“But when the magistrate pressed him, and said, ‘Swear, and I will release you; revile Christ,’ Polycarp said, ‘For eighty-six years have I been serving him, and he has done me no wrong; how then can I blaspheme my king who saved me?’ But when he again persisted, and said, ‘Swear by the genius of Caesar,’ Polycarp replied, ‘If you vainly think that I will swear by the genius of Caesar, as you say, feigning to be ignorant who I am, hear plainly: I am a Christian.’”*¹

In rage, the magistrate determined to make an example of the old pastor. At once, he was bound to a stake and surrounded by wood and kindling. The order was given, Polycarp was burned at the stake, and he died while praying and praising the Lord he loved.

Such public executions were designed to evoke fear and awe before the power of Rome. But this death had the opposite effect. Instead of marveling at the power of Rome, those who witnessed Polycarp’s final moments marveled at his faith—for he was *“faithful unto death”* (2:10). The story of Polycarp’s martyrdom inspired the faith of the church and led even more people to place their trust in Jesus.

For in the life and death of this faithful Christian, the watching world witnessed a hope that was bigger than Rome and more powerful than death.

3.) Christ’s Promise for the Church of Smyrna

Now, it is notable Jesus has no words of correction or rebuke for the church of Smyrna. In fact, Smyrna is one of only two churches that are not corrected in Christ’s messages to the seven churches.

This does not mean that the church of Smyrna is sinless. It just means that Christ acknowledges their suffering. He sees how they are weighed down and weary.

And to such people, Christ reaches forth his hand and tenderly speaks, *“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light”* (Matt 11:28–30).

So, if you are suffering right now. You can bring him your brokenness. You can bring him your sorrow. You can bring him your pain.

¹ Eusebius of Caesaria, “The Church History of Eusebius,” in *Eusebius: Church History, Life of Constantine the Great, and Oration in Praise of Constantine*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, vol. 1, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1890), 190.

Christ lays no burden upon the suffering church of Smyrna—only words of comfort, only words of hope, only words of promise. But the promise he gives is powerful.

He concludes his message to the church of Smyrna with the words, “...*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. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death*” (Rev 2:10b–11).

To those who are suffering and even dying for their faith, Christ promises that they will not be hurt by “*the second death*” (τοῦ θανάτου τοῦ δευτέρου). What does this mean?

Well, toward the end of Revelation, we will find this exact phrase again. Revelation 20:14 says, “*Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire*” (Rev 20:14). Thus, this phrase “*the second death*” is something that conveys the final and ultimate judgment of God. It is associated with “the lake of fire,” which is an apocalyptic image of eternal death and destruction. It is the place where *death* and the *power of death* will at last be vanquished forever.

Christ is saying, yes, the powers of this world can kill you (cf. Matt 10:28). But the first death is only temporary. The second death is forever. And if you are united with me, the second death cannot touch you!

Christ is calling the church of Smyrna, and he is calling all Christians of all ages, to see beyond the power of this world, to see beyond what the world may threaten to take from you, and to see the life Christ is giving you cannot be taken away.

And if we can believe that promise to be true—not just with our minds but with our hearts—we can fearlessly stand against the powers of this world with a courage that is supernatural.

We can see a glimpse of that supernatural courage in the life of the Apostle Paul, the great Christian missionary, church planter, and author of the majority of New Testament books. Even when he suffered, he suffered for Christ. Even when he was bound and imprisoned, his gospel went forth unbound (cf. Acts 28:31). And even when he was threatened with execution and death, he wrote these words from a prison cell, “*For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain*” (Phil 1:21).

Can you imagine how frustrated Paul’s mentality must have been to the Roman officials who were trying to punish, threaten, and intimidate him? They could not take anything away from him. No matter what they did, no matter how greatly he suffered, he exuded peace and joy and an unflinching confidence in Christ. For Paul’s hope was not contingent on his circumstances. He viewed his affliction as light and momentary, and he knew the weight of glory that awaited him was eternal (cf. 2 Cor 4:17).

I want to pause and consider just how radical of a response to suffering this is in our cultural moment. Our culture so often forms and conditions us to recite and recount all the ways we’ve been wronged and aggrieved and victimized by the world. And

increasingly, Christians fall prey this game far too often. We nurse our wounds, and we fester in resentment toward our cultural enemies. But the witness of Paul and Polycarp and all the martyrs that have gone before us is an utter rejection of such a mentality.

Ours is the way of Christ, who stood silently and courageously before his accusers. We follow the One whose sacrificial love exposed the evil of the world and overcame it by the power of grace. We have access to a way of hope that is possible because of resurrection.

So, when suffering or uncertainty about our future arises, we could feel sorry for ourselves and loudly complain. We could see to create our own justice through vengeance or violence. We could become anxious and fearful over the reality that the world is the world.

But the way of Jesus would challenge us to be distinctly different from a culture of competitive victimhood. The way of Jesus would call us to endure suffering with a peace that the world cannot know and a with courage that even death cannot destroy. We must walk with a confident faith and not with a cowering fear.

As the Apostle Paul writes elsewhere, *“For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him”* (Rom 8:15–17).

Whether in life or death, if you believe and trust in Christ, you are forever united with him. Even when you suffer, you will never suffer alone. Our God knows us, he sees us, and he is *with us*. He is the shepherd of our soul; even in the valley of the shadow (Ps 23:4). Indeed, even our suffering is an act of participation in the One who suffered for our sake.

So, Redeemer Christian Church, may we also believe that there is a glory that is more enduring than our suffering. May rest that is a power that is greater than death.

For the One who once suffered for our sake is now enthroned in splendor. The One who once was dead is now forever alive. His face is shining like the sun. He is the first and the last. And he holds our future in his hands.

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Community

1. Read Revelation 2:8-11 and summarize Christ's message to Smyrna in your own words.
2. We can infer from the context of this passage that the church of Smyrna is enduring significant persecution. How can we distinguish between genuine persecution and situations where we may simply face inconvenience or disagreement due to our faith? Why is this distinction important?
3. Reflecting on Christ's message to the church of Smyrna, how can we find hope and endurance amid trials or opposition to our faith?
4. In what practical ways can we be inspired by and emulate the faithfulness and courage of historical figures like Polycarp when facing challenges to our beliefs in today's world?