



Sermon Series: The 8th Letter
July 24, 2022
CHRIST FIRST CHURCH

Sermon #2:
The Church at Smyrna
Revelation 2:8-11

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INTRO: Please turn your Bibles, or turn them on, once again, to the last book of the New Testament, the Book of Revelation. Revelation chapter 2. We will be looking at verses 8-11 today and talking about THE CHURCH AT SMYRNA.

This is the third sermon in the series, that we are calling, THE EIGHTH LETTER. There will be 9 sermons total, unless we can't get through one or two of the letters in a single sermon, then it might go longer. Either way, It should be quite an enjoyable and enlightening journey through the second and third chapters of Revelation.

OPENING: Today we are looking at the second church addressed by Jesus Christ, the church at Smyrna. Smyrna was a great city of that day. Situated about 35 miles north of Ephesus, it too was a seaport city. A rival for Ephesus in beauty, wealth, and sadly, idolatry. This was the church of martyrdom. The saints at Smyrna were persecuted harshly and on every side. A stadium in the middle of the city was the site where many Christians lost their lives, being burned alive for their faith in Christ. Polycarp, a pupil of the apostle John, was a prominent second century leader in the church of Smyrna. He was martyred there in the year 155. Because of their faithfulness to God through persecution, Christ promised to this church His faithfulness.

Smyrna, and the church at Philadelphia, that we will look at in a few weeks, are the only churches of the seven that Jesus did not condemn for anything. They were given no command to repent, as were the others. That being said, it is very interesting to note, that of the seven churches mentioned in these letters, only in the modern cities of Smyrna and Philadelphia is there a viable and formal Christian church still in existence. REMEMBER, the Church of Ephesus was told in v 5 of chapter 2, "Repent and perform the deeds you did at first. But if you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place." God did exactly what He said He would do.

SMYRNA means "Myrrh" (suffering). Smyrna is known as Izmir today. Smyrna was the crown jewel of Asia Minor. It was called this because the Acropolis of the city was encircled with flowers and a hedge of Myrtle trees. The city was adorned by beautiful temples erected to Zeus, Diana, Aphrodite, and Apollo. They also had a music theater and a Stadium. Although Izmir is predominately Muslim today, still it's estimated that there are between 250,000 - 320,000 Christians still living there. READ WITH ME...

Revelation 2:8-11 "To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of the First and the Last, who died and returned to life. 9 I know your affliction and your poverty—though you are rich! And I am aware of the slander of those who falsely claim to be Jews, but are in fact a synagogue of Satan. 10 Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Look, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison to test you, and you will suffer tribulation for ten days. Be faithful even unto 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. The one who overcomes will not be harmed by the second death."

Notice...

1) LETTER INTRODUCTION: v 8 *"To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of the First and the Last, who died and returned to life."*

Here, we have a similar introduction as with all the letters. Jesus, by way of the Holy Spirit, and dictated by John, addresses the lead pastor of the church that is in the city of Smyrna.

We have no record in the NT of the founding of this church, but in Acts 19:10 where Luke describes Paul's stay in Ephesus, we read, "...for two years, ...everyone who lived in the province of Asia, (Smyrna is in Asia about 35 miles north of Ephesus) Jews and Greeks alike, heard the word of the Lord." It is reasonable to conclude that the church at Smyrna had it's beginning during the period of time that Paul was in Ephesus.

Remember that in Revelation 1:11 Jesus tells John to, "Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea." So while each angel of the churches received a letter specifically for them, it is clear from Jesus' words that all 7 churches received all 7 letters. And these letters have been handed down to the churches throughout the ages to instruct us in the way of righteousness.

"...These are the words of the First and the Last," Here, Jesus gives us another snapshot of Himself, as He did in the first letter, and will do it with all the letters. (In ancient letters, the writer of the letter, would identify himself at the beginning of the writing, not the end, as we do today.) So, Jesus identifies Himself as the "First and the Last." This simple phrase is an assertion by Jesus that He is indeed the Son of God and very God! We know this by what God says about Himself in the Book of Isaiah.

Isaiah 41:4 *"I, the LORD, am the first, and with the last. I am He."*

Isaiah 44:6 *"Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: 'I am the first and I am the last, And there is no God besides Me.'"*

Isaiah 48:12 *"Listen to Me, O Jacob, even Israel whom I called; I am He, I am the first, I am also the last."*

Make no mistake, Jesus is the Son of God! He goes on to say, v 8 *"These are the words of the First and the Last, who died and returned to life."* There is no greater statement of authority and power! Jesus died, for the sins of all mankind. But He RETURNED TO LIFE! Do you believe that? Believing that is essential to salvation. If you plan to go to Heaven when you die, it is absolutely necessary that you believe in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ! YOU MAY SAY, how can I believe in something that is so far fetched, so out of my realm of understanding? You can only believe it by faith. But the good news is, FAITH is a gift of God, that He gives freely to mankind. He may give you that gift today. If He does, don't turn it away, accept His gift! Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you WILL be saved!

John MacArthur - Knowing that they were undergoing difficult times, Christ was reminding them that He transcends temporal matters, and, through their union with Him, so should they. And should they face death at the hands of their persecutors, beside them is the One who conquered death and who promised, *"I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die"* (John 11:25-26).

I) LETTER INTRODUCTION: v 8

II) THEIR FAITHFULNESS IN HARDSHIP ACKNOWLEDGED: v 9

"I know your affliction and your poverty—though you are rich! And I am aware of the slander of those who falsely claim to be Jews, but are in fact a synagogue of Satan."

Again, Jesus starts by saying, "I KNOW". This speaks of His omniscience. It's important that we understand who Jesus is. Jesus is the ALL PERCEIVING, ALL POWERFUL, and ALL PRESENT God. He is ever present at all times, able to do all things, and knows everything that can be known since the beginning of time, until the end of time, and throughout eternity. When Jesus tells us, HE KNOWS, rest assured He does indeed.

"I know your affliction and your poverty—though you are rich!" "Affliction" or "tribulation" is the Greek word, "thlipsis", which means to crush, press, or squeeze. Thlipsis is a strong term which does not refer to minor inconveniences, but to real and heavy hardships on a man. It conveys the idea of being placed under pressure and crushed beneath a weight. The church at Smyrna knew the weight of persecution. And not only from the Romans who were in power at the time, but in some cases, even more so, from the Jewish religious establishment. That's the reason Jesus goes on to say, *"And I am aware of the slander of those who falsely claim to be Jews, but are in fact a synagogue of Satan."*

The church in America knows nothing of this kind of persecution. We have lived in an abundantly blessed country! We have known religious freedom unlike any nation ever before us. We have taken for granted the favor which God has poured incessantly out on us. And because of that, we have become weak as a entity. We have an entitlement mentality that we aren't even aware of enough to ask forgiveness for. God help us! We need a revival that will lead to brokenness and repentance, and a coming back to our senses. May God make it so here at Christ First Church!

Jesus says to this church, *"I know...your poverty—though you are rich!"* Here is another paradox of Christianity, the poor who are rich. The world cannot understand this, but the Scripture clearly teaches this truth. James 2:5 says, *"Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?"* Paul says in 2 Corinthians 8:9, *"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich."*

IF YOU HAVE GOD YOU HAVE EVERYTHING, IF YOU DON'T HAVE GOD, YOU HAVE NOTHING!

Let's prove that point. Notice...

III) GOD'S FAITHFULNESS IN HEARTBREAK ASSURED: v 10

"Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Look, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison to test you, and you will suffer tribulation for ten days. Be faithful even unto death, and I will give you the crown of life."

"Do not fear what you are about to suffer..." Jesus starts with a word of surety and comfort. Have you ever noticed that God doesn't beat around the bush? In this statement, He tells them in no uncertain terms, that they WILL suffer, shortly. But then

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CONTINUED He commands, "DO NOT FEAR".

"Do not fear" is in the present imperative with a negative, calling for them to cease being afraid. Jesus gave the same command to John in Revelation 1:17 "When I saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man. But He placed His right hand on me and said, "Do not be afraid".

Sometimes we think that Christians who endure persecution are almost super-human, and we don't appreciate the depths of fear they struggle with. Fear is the normal reaction to the threat of persecution and suffering. But here's the principle, when we suffer for His Name, we can be assured that He will provide the grace to go through the suffering, whether it passes, or whether we pass from it. His grace is sufficient in every "crushing" circumstance of our lives.

"Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Look, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison to test you, and you will suffer tribulation for ten days. Be faithful even unto death, and I will give you the crown of life." Those are sobering words! And Jesus was telling them the truth! He always does. Many Christians suffered and died in Smyrna. It would be just 60 years after this letter was written that Polycarp, the beloved pupil of John, and bishop in Smyrna, would be burned at the stake and stabbed to death for his belief in Christ. He wasn't the first to be martyred, nor was he the last. But Jesus, again, true to His word, was with them.

ILLUS: I want to read something to you. The story I'm about to read is the earliest known account of a Christian martyrdom. Written about the year 156, within months of the event it describes, it is an authentic eyewitness report of the heroic death of Polycarp.

"A local persecution of Christians has been going on. Some of Smyrna's Christians have already been put to death, and search parties have been looking for the bishop, who has been persuaded to do the prudent thing and leave town. Someone has just tipped off the pursuers that Polycarp is hiding out at a farmhouse in the country.

The mounted police set out on Friday about suppertime. They carried their usual weapons, as if they were advancing against a bandit. Late in the evening, they arrived to arrest Polycarp and found that he was resting upstairs. He could have escaped to another place but decided to stay. "God's will be done," he said.

When Polycarp heard that the police were there, he went downstairs and talked with them. Everyone was amazed at his age and courage and wondered why there should be so much haste about arresting an old man like this. Despite the lateness of the hour, he had a table set for them to eat and drink, as much as they desired. He asked them to give him an hour to pray undisturbed, and they agreed.

So Polycarp stood and prayed out loud. He was so filled with the grace of God that, for two hours, he could not be silent. Those who listened were astounded, and many were sorry that they had come to arrest such a venerable old man.

When Polycarp had finished his prayer, after remembering everyone who had ever crossed his path—both small and great, high and low—and the whole Church throughout the world, the time came for him to leave. They set him on an ass and led him into the city.

The chief of police, named Herod, and his father, Niketas, met Polycarp there and took him into their carriage. Sitting beside him, they tried to persuade him to change his mind: “What harm is there in saying ‘Lord Caesar,’ and offering sacrifice, and saving yourself from death?”

At first Polycarp did not answer them, but when they kept at it, he said, “I am not going to do what you advise.” Then they gave up trying to persuade him and began to make threats. They forced him out of the carriage so fast that he scraped his shin getting out. Without even turning around, as though he had felt nothing, Polycarp walked on quickly and was taken to the noisy stadium.

As he entered, a voice from heaven came to him: “Be strong, Polycarp, and act like a man.” No one saw the speaker, but our friends who were there heard the voice.

Polycarp was brought before the proconsul. He also tried to persuade him to deny the faith. “Respect your age,” he said. “Swear by the divine power of Caesar. Change your mind. Say, ‘Away with the atheists!’” But Polycarp, with a solemn look at the unruly mob in the stadium, pointed to them and, looking up to heaven, said, “Away with the atheists!”

The proconsul urged him harder. “Take the oath and I’ll let you go. Curse Christ.”

“Eighty-six years I have served him, and he never did me any wrong,” said Polycarp. “How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”

When the proconsul kept insisting, “Swear by the divine power of Caesar,” Polycarp answered, “If you vainly suppose that I will swear by the divine power of Caesar, as you say, and if you pretend that you do not know who I am, listen plainly: I am a Christian. And if you wish to learn the Christian message, arrange a meeting and give me a hearing.”

“I have wild animals,” the proconsul said. “I’ll throw you to them unless you change your mind.”

“Call them in,” Polycarp replied, “for we are not allowed to change from something better to something worse.”

“Scorn the wild beasts and I’ll have you burned alive, if you don’t change your mind.”

Polycarp said, “You threaten with fire that burns for a short time and is soon quenched. You don’t know about the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment that awaits the wicked. But why are you waiting? Come, do what you will.”

Polycarp radiated courage and joy as he said these and many other things. Not only did his face show no sign of distress, it was so full of grace that the proconsul was astonished and sent his herald into the middle of the arena three times to announce: “Polycarp has declared that he is a Christian.”

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CONTINUED At the herald's announcement, the whole crowd roared with wild anger and a loud cry: "This is the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our gods, who teaches many to stop offering sacrifice to the gods." Shouting out with one voice, they demanded that Polycarp be burned alive.

This happened incredibly fast—faster than it takes to tell the story. The mob hurried to gather wood and kindling from the shops and bathhouses. When the fire was ready, Polycarp took off his outer clothes, unfastened his belt, and tried to take off his shoes.

Immediately they began to pile the wood around him. They were going to nail him to the stake as well, but Polycarp said, "Leave me the way I am. He who gives me power to endure the fire will help me to remain in the flames without moving, even without being secured by nails." So Polycarp put his hands behind him and was bound, like a noble ram out of a great flock ready for sacrifice, a burnt offering prepared and pleasing to God. Looking up to heaven, he said: 'Lord God Almighty, Father of your beloved and blessed Child, Jesus Christ, through whom we have received full knowledge of you, the God of angels and powers and of all creation, and of the whole family of the righteous, who live before you:

I bless you for considering me worthy of this day and hour—of sharing with the martyrs in the cup of your Christ, so as to share in resurrection to everlasting life of soul and body in the Holy Spirit. May I be received among them into your presence today as a rich and acceptable sacrifice.

For this and for everything I praise and glorify you through the eternal and heavenly high priest, Jesus Christ, your beloved Child. Through him and with him, may you be glorified with the Holy Spirit, both now and forever. Amen.'

When he had said the amen and finished his prayer, the men in charge of the fire lit it, and a great flame blazed up. We who were given the privilege to witness it saw a great miracle, and we have been kept alive so that we might report to others what happened.

The fire took the shape of a vaulted room, like a ship's sail filled with wind, and surrounded the body of the martyr like a wall. And he stood inside it—not as burning flesh, but as bread that is being baked, or as gold and silver being refined in a furnace. And we smelled a fragrant aroma, like the scent of incense or other costly spices.

Seeing that his body could not be consumed by the fire, the lawless men finally commanded an executioner to go up and stab Polycarp with a dagger. When he did this, there came out a dove and so much blood that the fire was extinguished."

GOD IS FAITHFUL! We are not guaranteed that we will never be persecuted. There's no promise for the child of God that everything will always go smooth and we never have tribulation. On the contrary, Jesus tells us in **John 16:33**, "... In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." **TAKE HEART, DO NOT BE AFRAID, I AM WITH YOU**, oh, thank you Lord, what a word!

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The Crown of Life is one of 5 crowns that the Christian can earn. The Crown of Life is the martyrs crown. Jesus was telling these Christians that He knows what's about to happen, and He's already made arrangements for their deliverance.

IV) CONCLUSION: v 11 *"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who overcomes will not be harmed by the second death."*

He who overcomes. How is it again that we overcome? 1 John 5:4 *"because everyone born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world: our faith."*

D. L. Moody - *"He who is born only once will die twice; He who is born twice will die only once."*