

Smyrna
Revelation 2:8-11

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It happened 1,865 years ago on February 23, 155AD. His name was Polycarp, the bishop of the city of Smyrna. He was no longer a young man; as a matter of fact, he was eighty-six years old.

Through the years, the Christians of Smyrna had come under persecution and again public opinion was stirred up against the Christ followers, so the Roman Governor was taking action.

The story goes that when the Roman troops arrived at the Bishop's home he asked to be allowed to pray alone for an hour before he was taken away. At the same time, he ordered the very best food and drink to be brought to those who had come to arrest him.

When the Roman Governor finally confronted this senior citizen, he offered him a chance to recant. *"Deny Christ" he said, "And I'll let you go free."*

Polycarp just looked at him and said, "Deny Christ? I have served him eighty-six years. He has never dealt unjustly with me, so how can I blaspheme my King who saved me? If you expect me to swear by Caesar's name, as you suggest, and pretend to be ignorant of who I am, listen to what I openly say to everyone: I am a Christian. If you want to learn the teaching of Christianity, name the day and hear about our beliefs."

So, Polycarp was sentenced to be burned alive and on February 23, he died a martyr in the city of Smyrna.

Now, maybe you're wondering "So what?" Well the "so what" is that Polycarp was a disciple of John the Apostle. He was a member of the

church that the letter of the Revelation was addressed to, the church in Smyrna.

When I first read the account of Polycarp I wondered if he remembered the words that had been read in his church a lifetime before.

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Smyrna was the second of the Seven. Maybe it was the next city on the route the messenger was to take, or perhaps it was by design.

It was only natural for Ephesus be the first city, since it was the largest, so it's probable that Christ spoke to Smyrna next since it was located just a few miles north of Ephesus.

Historians tell us that Smyrna was the most beautiful city in all of Asia. It was known as the Flower or Crown of Asia. It not only stood on the trade routes to the Far East, but Smyrna had one of the safest and most convenient harbors in all Asia Minor.

The city had actually been destroyed around 590BC and for the next three hundred years existed as a collection of villages. Then, in 290BC, the city was rebuilt as one of the few planned cities in Asia. It was designed to be aesthetically pleasing with streets that were wide and straight.

Is it any wonder when Jesus addressed this city he referred to Himself in Revelation 2:8 as the one "*who died and came to life again.*" A reference not lost on the residents of this city that had been reborn.

The other description that Jesus gave of Himself was the *First and the Last*. This is a title that Jesus has used before to signify his eternal nature, however it would have had special meaning to the people of Smyrna.

They considered their city to be the greatest thing since sliced bread, that is if they had of had sliced bread. He was saying, *“You only think you are the first, I am.”*

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Regardless of the beautiful city in which it was located, the church in Smyrna didn't have a pleasant existence.

Appropriate to the times in which this letter was written, the church in Smyrna represented the age of persecution which lasted from approximately 95AD until 311AD.

The words of Christ reveal a great deal about this in Revelation 2:9, *“I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich!”*

Today many Preachers and Evangelists tell us that all our desires will be met; that we'll never experience trouble or sorrow. Our marriages will be perfect, our kids will be ideal, and all our dreams will be fulfilled when we faithfully serve Jesus.

It's at that point that we need to open our bibles and realize that the word persecution is used over thirty times in relation to Christians. Jesus didn't promise the church that life was going to come up roses.

He didn't promise that there would never be any problems. Jesus knew human nature. In Matthew 5:11, He tells us that we're *“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.”*

Did you hear what He said? Not **if** we're *mocked, persecuted and lied about* but **when** we're *mocked, persecuted and lied about*.

So, what are we, the church, doing wrong to be readily accepted by society today? The world doesn't perceive us to be a threat.

The church in Smyrna was a persecuted church and the Christians, even though they were solid, spiritual, dedicated followers of Jesus Christ, were poor.

In His salutation, Jesus doesn't give them a pep talk and tell them "*Cheer up, things could be worse.*" Instead he says, "*Cheer up, things will get worse.*" But what we need to understand is that Jesus had no criticism of this church.

They were just 30 miles away from the church in Ephesus which was condemned for losing their first love, but Jesus had no complaint against the church in Smyrna.

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Instead He focuses on their faithfulness, and specifically how they've been faithful in the face of three distinct challenges.

First, He says, "*I Know About Your Suffering.*" Very early in the life of the church, the Roman Government had been their friend. Christianity was seen as a sect of Judaism, a recognized religion.

And so, in the beginning, we see the Government stepping in to protect the church and its members on several different occasions. But things changed, Caesar worship became the norm.

What the emperors had seen as amusing had gotten out of hand. Originally the Roman Emperor had been venerated because of the benefits brought by being part of the Roman Empire.

He was worshipped in the same way that a Pop Idol or Movie Star might be worshipped but when Domitian became Emperor, he took Caesar worship seriously and demanded it of everyone.

His proclamations began with the words “*Our Lord and God Domitian commands...*” Everyone who addressed him in speech or in writing was to begin with the words: “*Lord and God.*”

All over the empire it was decreed that everyone must utter the words “*Caesar is Lord*” or die.

Now, persecution wasn’t a constant. Christians might live in peace for a number of years and then the persecutions would start again, for any number of reasons.

A constant threat of persecution hung over the church in Smyrna. In fact, the Greek word used in this verse for suffering literally means to be crushed. So the question of the day is: Have you been crushed for your faith lately?

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Second, Jesus tell them, “*I know About Your Poverty.*” In the Greek, there were two distinct words that could be used for poverty, the first was *Penia* (Pa-nee-a) which meant that you had nothing extra. A modern equivalent would be to be broke.

Or, to put it in today’s language... you can only afford basic cable, a pre-pay phone, a dial up connection for your internet, and going out to eat means McDonalds.

Do you understand that what we think of as the bare necessities in this country is considered being wealthy in 90% of the world? I’m not trying to make you feel guilty, but sometimes it’s hard to take the claims of poverty seriously.

The other Greek word that was used was *Ptocheia* (tow-kay-a). It meant having nothing at all. We might say destitute. This person who is *Ptocheia* (tow-kay-a) doesn’t have little, they have nothing. And that’s the word used here.

I'm sure they had a little more than nothing, but why were they so poor. It may be that they were on the bottom of the economic ladder, and in the Roman Empire there was a vast chasm between the haves and the have nots.

But even if that weren't the case, if the believers belonged to the merchant class when persecutions broke out that would have had an impact on their lives.

Stores would have been looted and customers, who weren't Christians, wouldn't want to be seen patronizing the stores of Christ followers.

So, life was not easy for Christians in Smyrna. Yet Jesus reassures them that while they may be poor in material things, they were rich in spiritual things.

Which of course goes back to Matthew 6:19-20, *"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal."*

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Lastly, Jesus tells them, *"I Know About the Slander."* When we were children and being hazed by other children, we would say, *"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me."*

Even though we repeated it endlessly, we never believed it. The power of words is incredible, and while the truth sometimes hurts it's when the words spoken are lies that it really hurts.

That was the problem with the church in Smyrna, the critics had nothing negative they could say about them, so they fabricated lies.

There were six slanderous charges that seemed to be brought against the church at various times.

Here are some of the lies with which the believers in Smyrna were accused. And, as is the case with most lies, they were partly based on truth.

- 1) On the basis of the words spoken during the communion service, *this is my body, and this is my blood*, some said that Christians practiced cannibalism.
- 2) Because the early Christians referred to their common meal as the Agape or the “Love Feast” the rumor circulated that it was an orgy and Christians practiced sexual immorality.
- 3) Because it was true that Christianity could separate families when one member became a believer and others didn’t, Christians were accused of tampering with family relations.
- 4) The Romans accused Christians of being atheists because the Romans couldn’t understand a worship which had no image(s) of its god. Roman gods had temples and statues dedicated to them.
- 5) Because the Christians refused to call Caesar Lord, they were considered to be unpatriotic or treasonous.
- 6) The Christians were accused of being arsonists because of the talk of the fires of the end times.

And you thought you had it rough if someone called you a holy roller. This is why Jesus tells Christians in Matthew 5:11, *“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.”*

Again, the word is **when** not **if**. So, what are people saying about you because you follow Jesus?

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Conclusion

Jesus said, I've seen that you are persecuted, poor and lied about, but here's the good news.

Revelation 2:10, *"Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days."*

Kind of like, *"Cheer up things could be worse, so I cheered up and sure enough things got worse."*

The term ten days in this verse is not to be taken literally. It simply means that the persecution won't be indefinite. It'll last for a set period of time, then it'll end. Jesus is saying, *"This won't last forever."*

It would be wonderful if that were the promise – that if we would just wait long enough everything will work out. That we'll always make it through the troubles that life throws our way. That we'll be victorious over persecution, illness, and abuse, but that wasn't the promise.

Here's the promise: *Remain faithful even when facing death, and I will give you the crown of life.* Time and time again the Word tells us *"Remain Faithful," "Don't give up," "Persevere,"* and **then** you win.

You get to live forever, without pain and without fear. Even if you're burned at a stake, die of a horrible disease, or if everyone abandons you, Jesus won't. So, remain faithful.

This promise isn't just for those believers who lived in a city in Asia Minor 2000 years ago. This promise is for us today, as stated in Revelation 2:11, *"Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death."*

Can you claim that today? That whatever happens, God is still in control. If you're one of His children, then ultimately you'll be with Him.

What happens in this life is just a shadow of eternity; don't trade the whisper of today for all your tomorrows. Remain faithful, don't give up, persevere.