

Be Faithful Until Death - Persecuted Church

Our study is in Revelation 2:8-11. This is the second message to another of the seven churches in Asia Minor. It is a message from Jesus through the apostle John to the church in Smyrna. We learned in the last study that five of the seven churches had serious problems, but only two of the churches were without a warning of God's judgment against them. This message to Smyrna is very positive, but this church is one that few Christians would probably be eager to join.

JESUS CONQUERED DEATH. We begin with verse 8. It says,

And to the
angel of the
church in
Smyrna write:
The first and
the last, who
was dead, and
has come to
life, says this .
. . . Revelation
2:8a (NASB)

The first thing we are told is that this letter is to the church at

Smyrna. While there is much that we could say about Smyrna, we are actually only interested in the condition of this ancient city at the time the apostle John wrote the book of Revelation, which was in A.D. 95. The ruins of this ancient city are about 40 miles due north of the ancient city of Ephesus. The population of the city was about 200,000 and it ranked with Ephesus and Pergamum as the "First of Asia."¹ It was known for its sciences and medicine. Smyrna was a wealthy city.

Sir William Ramsay states,

1. Alan Johnson. Revelation. Expositor's Bible Commentary. Regency Reference Library. 1981. vol 12. pp. 436-437.

. . . Aristides, who lived much in Smyrna can hardly find language strong enough to paint the beauty and the crown of Smyrna. He compares the city . . . to the crown of Ariadne.²

Notice the two references to a crown in this quote. Aristides compared the city to a crown and historical records reveal that Smyrna was often connected with a crown.³ Smyrna was also called the crown of Ionia. William Ramsay points out that a crown in the ancient city was often connected to crowns worn by the gods and goddesses. Ancient records reveal that if one stood in the harbor and looked to the top of Mount Pagus,

which was part of the city, the city looked like a crown with buildings on top of the hill. Others called the city a flower since the top of a flower is like a crown.⁴ Smyrna had a beautifully paved street called the "Golden Street" that wound

around Mount Pagus. It started with the temple of Cybele, passed by the temples of Apollo, Asclepius and Aphrodite and ended with the temple of Zeus on top of the mountain.⁵

Smyrna had competed against eleven other cities for the right to become the center of Emperor worship. In A.D. 23

2. William M Ramsay. The Letters to the Seven Churches. Baker Book House. 1985 reprint of 1904. p. 257.

3. Ibid., p. 256.

4. Paige Patterson. Revelation. The New American Commentary. B&H Publishing. 2012. p. 92.

5. Johnson. Ibid. p. 437.



the Roman Senate granted Smyrna their request.⁶ In short, Smyrna was a city given to demonic activity because as the apostle Paul states in 1 Corinthians 10:20 the Gentiles . . .

... sacrifice to demons and not to God . . . 1 Corinthians 10:20
(NASB)

The city was an evil city given to the demonic, or we could say the occult.

JESUS IS OUR ETERNAL, ALMIGHTY GOD. At the end of verse 8, the pastor was told that Jesus was the speaker who is . . .

The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life . . . Revelation 2:8b (NASB)

Revelation 1:17 and Revelation 22:13 reveal this phrase refers to Jesus. Three times in the book of Revelation Jesus refers to Himself as the first and the last. This is a reminder of Isaiah 44:6 and Isaiah 48:12 where God calls Himself the first and the last. That is, Jesus was and is God. Jesus is our eternal, almighty God.

JESUS HAS DEFEATED THE DEVIL. Then Jesus said, “He was dead and has come to life.” This reminded the believers in Smyrna and us of the fact that the physical, mortal body of the God-man, Jesus Christ, died on the cross and then returned to life. When Jesus died on the cross, not only did He take our sins upon Himself and suffered in our place, He also defeated sin according to John 8:36. 1 Timothy 1:10 adds that Jesus defeated death and Hebrews 2:14 says that Jesus rendered the devil powerless when He defeated the power of death. The verse says,

Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil . . . Hebrews 2:14 (NASB)

In short, to say “He was dead and has come to life” is Jesus’ victory statement and believers do not have to fear death.

PRINCIPLE #1 - JESUS KNEW EVERYTHING ABOUT

THEIR CHURCH. Then in the first part of verse 9, Jesus tells the church that He has known what has been happening to them all along.

I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich . . . Revelation 2:9 (NASB)

Jesus Already Knew About Their Persecution and Poverty. Jesus says, “I know.” He said the same thing earlier in His message to the church in Ephesus. The Greek word that Jesus used for “know” is *odia*. It is in the perfect tense which refers to completed action in the past that continues into the present. That is, He knew all about this church and what was happening to them for a long time. He was not just notified by an angel that there is a problem in Smyrna! He was not taking a nap or sleeping on the job, for Psalm 121:4 says,

Behold, He who keeps Israel
Will neither slumber nor sleep.
Psalm 121:4 (NASB)

This is a great comfort if we think about this statement for a while. This little, four letter word “know” tells us that Jesus was fully aware of their situation. In Matthew 28:20, Jesus had promised to never leave or forsake them. So He not only knew exactly what was happening, He was with them! The same is true today! Our God knows everything about us and the church. He is watching!

Then Jesus said that He knew about their tribulation and poverty. The Greek word for “tribulation” refers to more than simple suffering or difficulties. This Greek word is *thlipsis* and it literally refers to “persecution.” The Greek word for “poverty” in this verse is *ptocheia*. It does not refer to general poverty, but to the poverty of a beggar, such as Lazarus. Lazarus was a beggar seeking crumbs of bread from the rich man’s table. That is, this word refers to someone who has nothing but the clothes on his or her back and whatever they can carry. This means these believers in Smyrna were being persecuted and they were in poverty. Hebrews 10:32-34 tells us that when some of the early Christians were persecuted, their persecutors seized their property. Here is the passage.

6. Ibid.

But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, partly by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated. For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one. Hebrews 10:32-34 (NASB)

Today in the United States and in other parts of the world, Christians are losing their jobs, being harassed, insulted and

maligned. It is obvious during the current pandemic that while the rioters are allowed to be in public without face masks and without demands for what is called social distancing, churches in a number of states are not allowed to meet. If they can meet, some cannot sing. It is increasingly common for Christians to be

persecuted in a variety of ways. So just imagine what was happening to the believers in Smyrna under Roman Law. Persecution against Christians had started during the reign of Nero and had broken out again under Domitian from about A.D. 81 to A.D. 96. That means those believers were living in a time period of severe persecution. Most likely, these believers found it difficult to secure employment. That may be why Jesus said, "I know you have been persecuted and that you are beggars."

Then Jesus said, "But you are rich!" They were rich spiritually because they were believers. Ephesians 1:3 said that they

had every spiritual blessing in heaven!

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ . . . Ephesians 1:3 (NASB)

Ephesians 2:6 says that we are already sitting in heaven. That is our position in Christ. Our salvation is so secure that the verse speaks as if we are already there. Jesus told the disciples in John 14:1-4 that He would go and prepare a place for them.

1 Peter 1:4 says that believers already have a reservation in heaven. We are just waiting to go and check out our new place in heaven! 2 Peter 1:2-3 says that we have everything pertaining to life and godliness already. In summary, these believers were richly blessed to the point of overflowing! So, Paul said,



For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. Philippians 1:21 (NASB)

Paul said he would rather be in heaven. He was rich. They were rich and we are rich! So Jesus reminded them to "think heavenly" when He said, "You are rich!"

Jesus Already Knew About Their Persecutors. The last part of verse 9 says that Jesus already knew about . . .

. . . the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not but

are a synagogue of Satan. Revelation 2:9b (NASB)

There have been some wild explanations about this statement. But the meaning is rather simple if we focus on a few words and then dig into some historical facts. First, the word “blasphemy” refers to slander against God. Now that is what the Jewish leaders did to Jesus. They denied that His miracles were the work of God. They rejected His claim that He was God. At His trial Jesus said He was the Son of God and that was the excuse the Jewish leaders used to justify His crucifixion. Then they said He never came back to life. Then they tried to stop the apostles from preaching about Christ. They tried to murder Christians. So, this is a reference to Jews blaspheming Christ.

Next, we are told that those who were blaspheming were not Jews. Romans 9:6-8 explains this comment when it says real Jews are not simply descendants of Abraham by flesh and blood (Galatians 3:16, 29). Real Jews are spiritual Jews who are actively believing in Christ. People do not become Christians because their parents were Christians, or because of their race. The Jews thought they had an inside track to heaven because they were Jews. Next, we are told they were from a synagogue, and now we have all the pieces to understand this verse. That is, these Christians were being persecuted by the Jews from the synagogue in Smyrna. They rejected Jesus as their Messiah, and they hated Christians.

Then Jesus referred to the “synagogue of Satan.” What an amazing statement from Christ. He knew exactly what was happening! This was not slander. He gave them facts. Satan was the one influencing the Jews to persecute Christians. Remember all of the temples in Smyrna! Remember the temples to Zeus, Cybele, Apollo, Asclepius and Aphrodite! Remember that Smyrna was the center of emperor worship! Remember that Paul said that demons are the real power behind the idols and sacrifices! Jesus’ point was that Smyrna was a demonic place and Satan was attacking the Christians! He used the Jews as a tool.

Jesus Already Knew Their Suffering Would Continue. Verse 10 refers to Satan again. Only this time he is called the devil and we are given more information about what will happen to this church.

Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. Revelation 2:10 (NASB)

At this point it is very obvious Jesus had known about their persecution. He knew the real source of their sufferings and knew what was going to happen!

So, this gives us our first important principle. Jesus knows exactly what is happening in every church.

PRINCIPLE #2 - JESUS PERMITS SATAN TO PERSECUTE US. Now there are three more things we need to notice about verse 10. The first thing to notice is that again Jesus said the devil was influencing people because we are told the devil would cast some of them into prison. Verse 9 has already told us Satan was influencing the Jews in the synagogue to attack the Christians. But what were the Jews actually doing to the Christians? How were they going to be cast into prison? History suggests a possible explanation. We are told that once a year a Roman citizen had to burn incense and worship Caesar. Failure to do so resulted in death. Alan Johnson in his commentary in Revelation states,

... more as an expression of political loyalty than religious worship ... all a citizen had to do was burn a pinch of incense and say, “Caesar is Lord [kyrios].” Yet most Christians refused to do this. Perhaps no where was life for a Christian more perilous than in this city of zealous emperor worship.⁷

So, this may explain that the Jews from the synagogue of Satan were watching these Christians to see if they would burn incense or maybe they just reported that they were disloyal to Rome. Another possibility is that it was common to claim Christians were arsonists because they kept talking about fire, flames, and brimstone. These accusations against the Christians would have been the result of the devil’s influence. I believe the name Satan was used in verse 9 to remind the believers that Satan is our accuser. That is the meaning of Satan. Revelation 12:10 reminds us that Satan is the accuser of the believers. The word devil means deceiver. Satan was deceiv-

⁷Johnson. Ibid.

ing the people into accusing the Christians.

It is also possible some Christians may have just been hated by the Jews because they acted godly or righteously. 2 Timothy 3:12 reminds us that the world will hate our godly behavior when it says,

Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. 2 Timothy 3:12 (NASB)

The point of the verse is that if you call yourself a Christian and are not being persecuted in some way, maybe you are not really living a godly life. May I ask, are you living a godly life? The believers in Smyrna could have avoided persecution by being secret Christians. Are you a secret Christian? You just do not tell anyone you are Christian. You hide your beliefs and appear like those around you.



Remember Jesus' words in Matthew 5:11.

Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Matthew 5:11 (NASB)

What did Jesus say? He said, "Blessed are you when people . . . falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me!" So Jesus told them to buckle up and get ready to suffer for Me. This is good encouragement for us too, because I believe that persecution will eventually breakout in the United States much sooner than we thought. Jesus warned us in Matthew 24:9

that Christians will be hated and suffer persecution. Eventually, the antichrist will take control of the entire world and all the nations of the world will attack Christians and Israel. That will include the United States; so we will be persecuted someday. I think it is coming sooner rather than later. Unbelievers will think they are doing a good thing. They do not realize that Satan is our accuser who deceives unbelievers into thinking they are doing a good thing. Satan is our enemy!

Our first important principle was that Jesus knows exactly what was happening in every church. Now our second important principle is that Jesus permits Satan to persecute us! It is

God's will that believers are persecuted.

PRINCIPLE #3 - JESUS USES PERSECUTION TO TEST OUR FAITH AND TO PURIFY THE CHURCH.

The second thing we need to notice in verse 10 is that these Christians would be cast into prison and have tribulation for ten days for

the purpose of testing them. Some believe the ten days refers to ten time periods of persecutions that Christians in the Roman Empire would experience. But notice there is nothing in the passage to support this creative idea. The biblical principle of interpretation is that we must understand Scripture literally unless it is obvious that we should understand it some other way. Otherwise, we will end up with all kinds of odd ideas. Therefore, we need to understand these ten days as ten, literal, twenty-four hour days.

A very strong suggestion based on historical data is that the ten days were days of preparation before they were thrown into gladiatorial combat in an arena, where death was almost cer-

tain.⁸ If so, what an ugly death for these Christians. But we are not given any such details. All we know is that they would be in prison for ten days and then die.

Now history tells us that sixty years later in A.D. 155-156 Polycarp was martyred. He was the pastor in Smyrna. It is popular to read his testimony in connection with this passage because he was martyred, but we do not know if he was even alive or if he was attending this church when this message was written. Conflicting information exists about his birth date. Therefore, I will not focus on him here.

Now I have a question, “Why did Jesus want the church to be persecuted like this?” The answer is that it was His will. He wanted the church and individual believers to be tested. 1 Peter 4:19 says,

Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right. 1 Peter 4:19 (NASB)

It was His will. This has been obvious since verse 9. 1 Peter 4:1, 12-16 gives us some insight as to the reason for their persecution when it says,

Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin . . .

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name. 1 Peter 4:1, 12-16 (NASB)

Here the apostle Peter gives us five important things to help us through persecution. The first thing to remember when we

are tested is that when we die we are freed from this body of sin! That is verse 1. The second thing to remember is that believers should not be surprised when we are tested. We are caught off guard because we are not used to it. 1 Peter 5:8 reminds us,

Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. 1 Peter 5:8 (NASB)

I think that is why Jesus told the believers in Smyrna He had been watching. He was not surprised.

The third thing to remember is given in verse 13. When we suffer, we are sharing in the sufferings of Christ. In John 15:20-21 He said this to the disciples.

“Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you . . .” John 15:20-21 (NASB)

Jesus said that a disciple is not greater than the master. We are His disciples. Now if Jesus was persecuted, why should we think we will escape? Peter says, “To the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing . . .”

The fourth thing to remember when we are suffering is 1 Peter 4:14. It says we are blessed when we suffer because we are Christians who are going to heaven. He is urging us to think heavenly! The fourth thing to remember is found in verse 16. We should not be ashamed to suffer for Jesus! He is urging us to think heavenly again! Then in verse 17 Peter gives us the fifth thing to remember. God uses suffering to purify churches, and people in churches will suffer.

For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? 1 Peter 4:17 (NASB)

When He says judgment is to begin with the household of God, he is saying that God uses persecution to refine and purify the church. You see, God is more interested in my holiness than in my physical comfort. God is more interested in your holiness than in your physical comfort. God is more

8. Patterson. Ibid. p. 98.

interested in the holiness of this church than anything else. That is why God uses a variety of sufferings to conform us into the image of Christ.

God also uses persecution to remove unbelieving people from a church and to reveal who are not Christians. Remember the second soil in the parable of the sower? The second soil in Matthew 13:20 heard the Word of God and received it with joy. Then in the next verse this individual leaves due to affliction and persecution. When that happens, the individual fails the test. James 1:2-3 would say he failed the testing of his faith. The persecution the believers in Smyrna were experiencing was going to become worse in order to fully test their faith and refine the church. That is, God allows Satan to test our faith, just as He allowed Satan to test Job.

So, our first important principle was that Jesus knows exactly what was happening in every church. Jesus permits Satan to persecute us! It is God's will that believers are persecuted. Now our third important principle is that Jesus uses persecution to test our faith and to purify the church.

PRINCIPLE #4 - JESUS URGES BELIEVERS TO REMAIN FAITHFUL, DISAPPOINTING SATAN. Then in verse 10 Jesus told the church to remain faithful until death and then they would receive the crown of life.

Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. Revelation 2:10 (NASB)

Jesus was not saying that they had to hang onto their faith in order to receive the crown of life, which refers to eternal life. That would mean salvation is by works and not by faith. Jesus was not urging them to hang on to their salvation. Instead, He was encouraging them to have strong faith, not little faith. We have recently discovered that strong faith comes by reading Scripture, being obedient and confessing when we sin, and praying. So, Jesus urges them to fix their eyes on Him. Have faith in Him! That is the only to get through persecution.

Now I have another question. Why was it important for those believers who were going to die to be faithful? I can understand the purifying benefit to the church to watch

other Christians die. Who would want to attend this church if you were not really a Christian? If you were a Christian, I can understand the refining benefit to be more holy and the motivation to be bold through the Spirit. But if you are the one who dies, what is the benefit of remaining faithful? Even Peter denied Christ and he did not lose his salvation. He still remained a disciple and became an apostle. Then he wrote 1 and 2 Peter. So, what is the difference if a believer momentarily denies Jesus just as Peter did, dies, and goes to heaven?

I believe there are three reasons. First, 1 Peter 4:1 says believers will be free from the struggle with sin, and we are finally able to be with Christ. Second, there is a benefit to the other believers to see your boldness in the face of death. Acts 4:29-30 is a great example. In that passage the early Christians prayed for boldness to preach Jesus and the Spirit gave them boldness to preach. The third benefit is that we escape Satan's attacks on our faith. Scripture reveals that Satan works to cause people to doubt that Jesus is God, Savior, and Lord. Remember the parable of the sower tells us the evil one snatches away the Word of God so that people do not understand it. That is, Satan works against them having faith. In the parable of the tares, we are told the evil one sows tares among the wheat. Those tares then become active in the life of the church. Some of them become involved in leadership positions and even teach Scripture. False teaching causes people to not believe.

Remember in Luke 22:31-32 that Jesus warned Peter that Satan had asked to sift him as wheat to test him? Jesus told Peter that He had prayed for him to not lose faith. Remember that Satan asked to test Job and then told God that he would make Job curse God to His face? You see, Satan targets our faith. So, Jesus tells the believers in Smyrna, be faithful. Deny Satan a victory here! Have great faith.

So, our principles are: Jesus knows exactly what was happening in every church. Jesus permits Satan to persecute us! It is God's will that believers are persecuted. Jesus uses persecution to test your faith and to purify the church. Now our fourth important principle is that Jesus urges believers to remain faithful, disappointing Satan.

PRINCIPLE #5 - JESUS PROMISES REWARDS. The last part of verse 10 and verse 11 says,

... Be faithful until 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. He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.
Revelation 2:11 (NASB)

Do you remember that the city looked like a crown? Jesus is telling these believers that the real crown is not living in beautiful Smyrna but in heaven. Heaven is the crown of life. Jesus is urging us to think heavenly again!

This term "second death" is explained in Revelation 20:11-14. It refers to the lake of fire where Satan, the demons and every unbeliever will spend eternity. Jesus is urging us to think

heavenly again and announces defeat for Satan! That is where he is going! Remember that in the opening Jesus said that He had died and had come back to life? Satan is going to the lake of fire and he will be there forever and ever. This is a victory statement for every persecuted believer! We are the overcomers through Jesus Christ. So, there are wonderful reasons to be faithful in persecution and death. We escape this sinful world. We will obtain the crown of life and we will be with Jesus! Amen!