

3. Facing Prison

Revelation 2:8-11

Prayer

Introduction

Late in the first century A.D., or early in the second, a young man named Polycarp sat at the feet of the apostle John, learning from him what it meant to follow Jesus Christ. He was probably in the congregation as a young man when seven letters from John arrived to be read, which John had written down from a vision he had received on the prison-island of Patmos.

In the second century A.D., Polycarp (who's name means 'fruitful') became a church leader in the city of Smyrna, whose letter from Jesus we read a moment ago.

Polycarp was a fascinating character, and his story might help us to understand the Smyrna that John was commanded to write to.

About twenty years after John wrote down the Revelation, a policy towards Christians was put in place in the neighbouring Roman province of Bithynia. One can assume things were similar in Asia. The governors felt the Christians weren't worth pursuing as troublemakers, because, on the whole, they were law-abiding and peaceful citizens. However, should someone make an accusation against a Christian in person, and that Christian refuses to recant his faith in Jesus by burning incense to the emperor, then he would be sentenced to death in one of many imaginative and violent ways.

Around the mid-150's A.D., as a result of Jewish and Roman animosity towards Christians, Polycarp was sought out as a major instigator of the hated Christian religion in the city of Smyrna. He was captured and brought to trial, facing a sentence of death if he did not recant.

John Foxe picks up the story in his *Book of Martyrs*:

“Polycarp, the venerable bishop of Smyrna, hearing that persons were seeking for him, escaped, but was discovered by a child. After serving a meal for the guards who apprehended him, he desired an hour in prayer, which being allowed, he prayed with such fervency, that his guards repented that they had been instrumental in taking him. He was, however, carried before the proconsul, condemned, and burnt in the market-place. Twelve other christians, who had been intimate with Polycarp, were soon after martyred.

The circumstances attending the execution of this venerable old man, as they were of no common nature, so it would be injurious to the credit of our professed history of martyrdom to pass them over in silence. It was observed by the spectators, that, after finishing his prayer at the stake, to which he was only tied, but not nailed as usual, as he assured them he should stand immoveable, the flames, on their kindling the fagots, encircled his body, like an arch, without touching him; and the executioner, on seeing this, was ordered to pierce him with a sword, when so great a quantity of blood flowed out as extinguished the fire. But his body, at the instigation of the enemies of the gospel, especially Jews, was ordered to be consumed in the pile, and the request of his friends, who wished to give it Christian burial, rejected. They nevertheless collected his bones and as much of his remains as possible, and caused them to be decently interred.”¹

It was the church at Smyrna that wrote an account of his martyrdom, where we are told of his final defence:

“But when the magistrate pressed him hard and said, 'Swear the oath, and I will release you; revile the Christ,' Polycarp said, 'Eighty-six years have I been His servant, and He has done me no wrong. How then can I slander my King who saved me?’”

(The Martyrdom of Polycarp, 9.3)

'You threaten that fire which burns for a season and after a little while is quenched: for you are ignorant of the fire of the future judgment and eternal punishment, which is reserved for the ungodly. But why do you delay? Come, do what you will.’”

(The Martyrdom of Polycarp, 11.2)

The witnesses to Polycarp’s execution also record what they saw:

“The fire, making the appearance of a vault, like the sail of a vessel filled by the wind, made a wall round about the body of the martyr; and it was there in the midst, not like flesh burning, but like [a loaf in the oven or like] gold and silver refined in a furnace. For we perceived such a fragrant smell, as if it were the wafted odour of frankincense or some other precious spice.”

(The Martyrdom of Polycarp, 15.2)

¹ Excerpt From: John Foxe. “Foxe's Book of Martyrs Or A History of the Lives, Sufferings, and Triumphant Deaths of the Primitive Protestant Martyrs.” iBooks. <https://itun.es/au/rctD5.l>

And for all this, the Roman Catholic church made him the patron saint of earache and dysentery!

The theme of the letter to Smyrna that we are looking at today is quite obviously persecution - the sometimes violent oppression . And Polycarp's courage and humble faith in the face of dying for his Lord may tell us how the church at Smyrna responded to what Jesus said to them.

I wonder how will we respond?

We'll tackle this letter using the same framework that we spoke about last week, which is shared by all of the letters. Commission, characterisation, commendation, condemnation, command, and a promise the conquerors.

1. The Commission (v1)

Let's start with the Commission, where John is told:

“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write:”

(Revelation 2:8 ESV)

Smyrna as a city was an interesting place, especially compared to Ephesus, that we looked at last week.

It was a city of comparable size and importance. It lay north of the provincial capital of Ephesus, and also possessed a protected harbour and good overland connections.

The city was a centre for culture and religion. It had a large library, a famous stadium where sports took place, and the biggest amphitheatre in Asia. It had temples to Apollo, Aphrodite, and the Roman Emperor. The city was nicknamed 'The Glory of Asia'.

In contrast to Ephesus, though, Smyrna still survives today. The city of Izmir is the third largest city in Turkey, with a population of some 3mil people, and the second largest city on the Aegean Sea, surpassed only by Athens over the sea in Greece.

Presumably, the church in Smyrna began when people came to faith in Jesus through Paul's ministry in Ephesus in the 50's A.D., and then returned to Smyrna taking the gospel with them. There are no accounts in the book of Acts of any ministry in Smyrna.

2. The Characterisation (v1)

This is where Jesus describes himself in terms of the vision John saw of him in his ascended glory in chapter one. He describes himself to the Smyrnan church as:

"...the first and the last, who died and came to life."

(Revelation 2:8 ESV)

This is a reference to what John says about Jesus in 1:5, calling him *"the firstborn of the dead"* and what Jesus says to John about himself in 1:17-18:

"Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades."

(Revelation 1:17–18 ESV)

This of course points simply to the key event of Jesus' purpose on earth - his death and resurrection. Jesus died, taking on himself the just punishment due to humanity for sin. He rose to life again, permanently, having paid that price in full, satisfying God's justice and gaining his favour, not just for himself but for all who have faith in him.

In many ways, the death and resurrection of Jesus defines who he is: the perfect, sinless man who can stand uniquely before God as a representative of all mankind, to bear their sin, and as God the Son, over whom sin and death have no power.

And as John calls him "the firstborn of the dead", that is a reminder that those who have faith in him will also rise from the dead, to new life forever with him in heaven.

We'll discover as we go along why this description is so important and so relevant for the church at Smyrna.

3. Commendation (v9)

What usually follow here in each of the letters is a commendation of the Christian life well-lived in the church, balanced by a condemnation of the Christian life badly-lived.

In Smyrna, however, Jesus finds nothing to condemn. This wholly positive evaluation is only shared by one other church, the one in Philadelphia. We'll discover further similarities with that church in a few weeks.

Instead of a 'commendation' here though, Jesus shows more of a **compassion** for their circumstances:

"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."

(Revelation 2:9 ESV)

The first thing to comment on are the first two words Jesus speaks, which he says to all the churches: *"I know"*. This is a clear reminder that the risen, ascended and glorified Lord Jesus, the one who is an active presence among the lampstands of his churches, the Lord of the Church, knows exactly what is happening in his churches.

There is nothing that escapes his notice, and nothing is hidden from him. This should be both a comforting reminder, and sobering one.

Jesus remains sovereignly in control of his church. He remains sovereignly in control of this church, knowing exactly what's going on here. He is active in his church, and working out his purposes.

As I quoted two weeks ago when we spoke about John's vision of Jesus having eyes like flames of fire:

"This has at least three implications: 1) no sin that we commit will escape his notice, 2) he will see every faithful thing his people do, and 3) he will note every injustice done to his people by their enemies."²

Jesus highlights three things about their circumstances here:

1. **Tribulation** - the Greek word literally means 'pressure' and is translated variously as trouble, persecution, burden, affliction, etc. It's a word that's been used before in the book of Revelation, when John called himself *"your brother and partner in the tribulation"* (Revelation 1:9 ESV).

Jesus tells this church that he 'knows' their tribulation. I think there is more here than meets the eye. Jesus is not simply comforting the church with his sympathetic awareness of the unjust suffering they face, he is also comforting them with the empathy of experience. Jesus himself knows their tribulation, as he knows both the poverty and slander that they face.

² James M. Jr. Hamilton, Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches (Preaching the Word; ed. R. Kent Hughes; Accordance electronic ed. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2012), 49.

“For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”

(Hebrews 2:18 ESV)

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.”

(Hebrews 4:15 ESV)

We'll unpack the nature of their tribulation in the following two points:

- 2. Poverty** - as a result of the persecution in Smyrna, many followers of Jesus were suffering economically. This would have happened in a number of ways. For one, full participation in the commercial life of the city required at least some participation in the pagan spiritual life of the city — something which Christians would not do.

Also, known Christians would have been blackballed in business networks and trade guilds. As a result, they would struggle to buy and sell.

Listen to Hebrews 10:34:

“For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.”

(Hebrews 10:34 ESV)

But Jesus adds a little parentheses here: *“‘I know ... your poverty (but you are rich)’*” (Revelation 2:9 ESV)

Despite their material poverty, the Smyrnan Christians knew they had *“a better possession and an abiding one”*. Jesus also knew of the state of their hearts, that they based their security and satisfaction not on the depreciating treasures of this world, but on the eternal ones of the next.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul reminds those who trust in Jesus that they are *“as having nothing, yet possessing everything.”* (2 Corinthians 6:10 ESV)

James writes to Christians and encourages them:

"Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?" (James 2:5 ESV)

Surely this is a word to us who live in a world obsessed with material wealth, and who are constantly being tempted to place our security and satisfaction in that rather than in Christ?

- 3. Slander** - The third aspect of injustice against Jesus' followers, of which the Lord is fully aware, is slander (literally '*blasphemy*'). He also identifies the perpetrators of this injustice - *"those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan."* (Revelation 2:9 ESV).

During this period, the Roman government offered an exemption to the Jews from participating in the pagan religious life of the empire. In return, the money that was paid by Jews towards the upkeep of the temple before it was destroyed in A.D. 70 was now paid to Rome for the upkeep of pagan temples.

Now Christianity had really grown out of Judaism, and certainly to the Romans, they lumped the Christians in with the Jews and offered them the same sort of tolerance.

This upset the Jews enormously; they believed that the Christians were heretics, twisting and distorting the Old Testament Scriptures, and calling people away from God to follow Jesus of Nazareth, the imposter-Messiah.

They also knew that if a Christian was outed to the Roman authorities, there's a good chance that their allegiance to Jesus would cost them their life. So they would shamelessly do in Christians to the Roman authorities.

We don't often realise the level of jealousy and hatred towards the early Christians from the Jews. Obviously, we could start with Jesus' own rejection and death at the hands of the Jewish spiritual leaders.

But think also of Paul's pre-Christian life as a Jewish enforcer, *"ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison."* (Acts 8:3 ESV)

Paul himself suffered at the hands of the Jews many times after he became a Christian. He had to flee Damascus for his life shortly after his encounter with Jesus. He and his companions were often chased from city to city by the Jews. On one occasion, he was even stoned by them and left for dead outside Lystra, in Acts

14, only to get up, dust himself off and head back into the city to carry on his ministry.

On one occasion, Paul was arrested in the temple in Jerusalem.

This was all in fulfilment of Jesus' own words in John's gospel,

"They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me."

(John 16:2–3 ESV)

And if we fast forward to the time of Polycarp, we learn that the Jews were some of the chief antagonists there as well.

Again from the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*:

"When [Polycarp's confession of being a Christian] was proclaimed by the herald, the whole multitude both of Gentiles and of Jews who dwelt in Smyrna cried out with ungovernable wrath and with a loud shout, 'This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the puller down of our gods, who teaches numbers not to sacrifice nor worship.'"

(*The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 12.2)

When it was announced that Polycarp would be burned alive, we read:

"These things then happened with so great speed, quicker than words could tell, the crowds forthwith collecting from the workshops and baths timber and faggots, and the Jews more especially assisting in this with zeal, as is their wont."

(*The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 13.1)

What's even more shocking is that the writer records all this happening on a 'Great Sabbath'. The hatred these Jews had for followers of Jesus overrode even their own pious obedience to the Law of God on the Sabbath day of rest.

But let's not think that this is just a case for Christian anti-semitism, that Jews and Christians are to be forever mortal enemies.

There's a great tragedy here that Jesus disowns and condemns those who bear the name of God's chosen people. Paul is so burdened by this that in Romans 9:3 he says he would be willing to give up his own salvation if it meant that his Jewish brothers were saved.

Their problem was not that they were Jews, but rather that they claimed to know God and yet rejected his Son, the Messiah, Jesus Christ. As Jesus said, "*And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me.*" (John 16:2–3 ESV).

This meant that, wittingly or unwittingly, they had transferred their allegiance from God to Satan, the Accuser, the Blasphemer. As Jesus said to the Jewish leaders in John 8:

"If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires."

(John 8:42–44 ESV)

Though they say they are Jews, God's chosen people, they are not.

There is a warning here to us too — there are only two sides to be on, and it all comes down to what you do with Jesus. You can't claim to know God, and yet reject his Son.

The Command (v10)

Well, the church at Smyrna seems to be in a very difficult place. And it's about to get worse. Jesus says:

"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."

(Revelation 2:10 ESV)

One of the big themes of the book of Revelation is the cosmic conflict between good and evil, God and Satan. Though Satan is, in reality, no match for God and only acts under God's control, he is actively trying to destroy God's kingdom. Even though the Jews are accusing the Christians, Satan stands behind that persecution. And even though the

Roman authorities will be the ones throwing Christians into prison, Satan is also behind that.

Bear in mind that the penal system in the Roman Empire was quite different to what we have today, at least in practice. Prison wasn't typically a place of detention, it was a place of waiting. In prison, you waited for your case to be heard, and for sentence to be passed.

Often you waited in prison to hear if you would be allowed to live, or sentenced to die. At the end of Acts 24, Paul was left in prison in Caesarea for two years before he faced trial.

So, some believers will be thrown into prison, and will be tried for their lives. Jesus' command to "*be faithful unto death*" points in that direction.

But there is a time period attached to this persecution: "*ten days*". As we know, numbers are significant in Revelation, and often have a symbolic rather than literal meaning.

There may be an intentional reference here to the ten-day trial that Daniel and his fellow exiles faced in Babylon back in the Old Testament. You can read about it in Daniel 1.

Quite likely, it refers to an undefined, but short, limited period. With that in mind, let's look at how Jesus foretelling of persecution is actually filled with motivation to "*be faithful unto death*".

Jesus begins his command with the words, "*Do not fear what you are about to suffer.*"

Why? Because even though some will be face death for their loyalty to Jesus, and will become targets of the Devil himself, this trial has a limit placed on it by Jesus, and a purpose controlled by Jesus.

What the devil intends for destruction, Jesus intends for refinement. What the devil intends for evil, Christ overrides for good.

And finally, Jesus offers a glorious reward for those who do endure to the end: "*the crown of life*". It is the mark of a participation in Jesus' glorious victory, and an emblem of reigning with him forever.

To the Conquerors (v11)

Finally, we finish with a message to those who are faithful unto death, those who conquer, those who endure:

“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 2:11 ESV)

There is a beautiful irony here, that those who submit to an earthly death for the sake of the name of the Lord Jesus, will in fact live with him forever. Earthly defeat is heavenly victory.

To understand what Jesus says here, we need to turn to two other parts of the Bible, first in Matthew 10:28

“And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”

(Matthew 10:28 ESV)

and then right at the end of Revelation in 21:7-8

“The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death.”

(Revelation 21:7–8 ESV)

What these two verses tell us is that there is something far greater to fear than death due to human hostility. Far worse is to suffer destruction after death due to divine hostility, because of sin un-dealt with through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is saying here to his servants, who are being faithful under fire, that they need not fear the first nor the second death, if they remain faithful to the end, if they continue trusting him.

Which brings us full-circle, because it's on the basis of how he introduces himself in v8 that they can trust him: *“the first and the last, who died and came to life.”* (Revelation 2:8 ESV)

This description of Jesus is significant for the Smyranean suffers for two reasons. For one, Jesus shows himself to be eternal - he was there from the very beginning, and he will remain, unchanged, even after the ten days of trial. He will outlast any persecution against his people. He can therefore be a safe harbour for his people in the midst of any suffering.

For another, Jesus shows himself to be immortal. These Christians in Smyrna are facing death for their faith. To them Jesus says, "I've been there, I've done that, I've got the T-shirt." Because he has died and come to life, never to die again, all who trust in him will do the same. And they may follow his example with hope:

"For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly."

(1 Peter 2:21–23 ESV)

Conclusion

As we said before, this letter's dominant theme is that of persecution. It is a great encouragement in the face of persecution.

"The message therefore is that Smyrna must be not fearful, but faithful — to look not at the suffering, but beyond it to the all-controlling God."³

Persecution

OpenDoors Australia reports that today, worldwide, **1 in 12 Christians** live in daily fear of intimidation, incarceration and death for their faith Jesus. That's **215 million believers** across the world.

They are mostly confined to the top five **most dangerous countries** to be a Christian: North Korea, Somalia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sudan.

Each month, 322 Christians are killed for their faith, 214 churches and Christian properties are destroyed, and 722 cases of physical violence, abductions, rapes, arrests and forced marriages are committed against Christians.

We must be careful of ignoring the reality of the persecuted church around the world today. There are many around the world, based on these figures, that would find the letter to the church at Smyrna to be as real for them as it was 2000 years ago.

In fact, despite the cruelty and hostility of persecution against Christians during various periods of the Roman Empire, persecution against Christians today is actually far more widespread and serious than it was even back then. In 2016, a Christian was murdered for their faith every 6 minutes. The total was close to 90,000 deaths for following Jesus.

³ p.46, Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Revelation* (The Bible Speaks Today; ed. John R. W. Stott; Accordance electronic ed. Downers Grove.: InterVarsity Press, 1984),

We should remember these brothers and sisters, pray for them, that they would be faithful unto death, that they would trust in “the first and the last, who died and came to life”, and they would indeed conquer with Jesus.

But what about us?

I was reminded of a **statement** this week, made by a man named Mac Stiles at the Desiring God Pastors’ Conference a few years ago:

"Most of the world fears the raised fist. We fear the raised eyebrow."⁴

(Mac Stiles at the DG Pastors' Conference, 2013)

What is the worst that can happen to us for being Christians? Seriously?

Maybe you get called names. Hypocrite. God-botherer. Homophobe. Bigot. Out of date.

Big deal.

But it’s worth asking ourselves what we would do if the tide turned tomorrow. What if we woke up tomorrow and our faith in Jesus was outlawed, and we had to choose between our Lord and our lives? Jesus and our jobs? Our faith or our families?

It may yet happen. Biblical moral values are already being legislated out of our society. As a stronger and stronger response towards religious extremist is sought, Christians may well become collateral damage. As society has rightly become more and more disgusted by the behaviour of certain sectors within the church for the unconscionable abuse of children, what repercussions is the church likely to face, both from the judiciary and from society at large?

Friends, the book of Revelation constantly reminds us of the urgency of the hour. Right now, while we still enjoy relative peace and freedom, but this is the time to prepare for what may come later. Now is the time to toughen our hope and security in the Jesus who faced trial and suffering and emerged victorious. Now is the time to learn to stand upon his death and resurrection, come what may.

“Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

(Revelation 2:10 ESV)

⁴ <https://twitter.com/johnpiper/status/300303716769202176> (Accessed: 11 Feb 2017 at 21:28)