

Smyrna: The Persecuted Church

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[0 : 00] But if we could, this evening, for the Lord's help, if we could turn back to that portion of Scripture that we read. Revelation chapter 2.

Revelation chapter 2. And if we read again in verse 8. Revelation 2 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. 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.

[1 : 07] The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second day. As you know, it was Solomon who said, without vision, the people perish.

Without vision, the people perish. And as we mentioned last week, our denomination, it seeks to adopt and apply the vision statement, a healthy gospel church for every community in Scotland.

And it keeps pushing this vision statement, a healthy gospel church for every community in Scotland. And as I said before, it's good to have a vision. Because a healthy gospel church, it's not about figures.

It's about faith. It's not about quantity. It's about quality. It's not about goals. It's about godliness. It's not about popularity. It's about preaching, pastoring, and praying.

Because a healthy gospel church is focused and fixated upon Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone. And as we said, that's the vision Jesus revealed to John in this revelation.

[2 : 13] This apocalypse, this apocalypsis, where God is lifting the lid and removing the curtain and opening and lifting the veil, he's revealing Jesus Christ as the risen, ruling, and reigning king who is going to return.

And as we see from these seven churches, this apocalypse is for the universal church of Jesus Christ in every century. That's what the seven churches in Asia symbolize.

They symbolize the universal church of Jesus Christ in every century. But these seven churches in Asia, they're not only symbolic, they're also specific. They emphasize and they exemplify to us specific sins and specific struggles and stresses and strains that the church of Jesus Christ faces and will face in every century.

And this evening, we're considering the second of the seven churches in Asia, the church in Smyrna, which was the persecuted church. Ephesus was the loveless church, which we saw last week.

Smyrna was or is, as we see here, the persecuted church. Now, we mentioned last week that there's a pattern to each letter, where Jesus, he gives a word of commendation, then a word of correction.

[3 : 35] Word of commendation, then a word of correction. But there are two exemptions to that pattern. Because the church in Smyrna, and then also the church in Laodicea, the last church, instead of giving a word of correction, Jesus gives a word of consolation.

And so as we consider the persecuted church in Smyrna this evening, our headings are a word of commendation and a word of consolation. Jesus doesn't correct them. He doesn't give them a word of correction.

He gives them a word of commendation and a word of consolation. So first of all, a word of commendation. A word of commendation. Jesus says to them, he says, Last Wednesday evening, we were looking at the first of these seven churches, the church in Ephesus.

And we discovered that despite its history, its history of powerful preachers and this great history of solid and sound theology, by the time Jesus wrote to the church in Ephesus, it had become a legalistic and a loveless church, where they were legalistic in their head and they were loveless in their heart.

They were legalistic in their head and loveless in their heart. And as we saw last week, they were in danger of the light of their lampstand being removed unless they repent. But we also noted that the church in Ephesus was a wealthy seaport city.

[5 : 24] And it was situated on the southwest coast of what is now modern day Turkey. And as a city, Ephesus had built up its reputation as this key trade route on the Aegean Sea.

But inland from the sea, inland, Ephesus had three key routes. There were three major trade roads. And one of those trade roads went north.

It went north 35 miles towards the city of Smyrna. So that's where we're going this evening. We're just going 35 miles north.

Now, the city of Smyrna is known today as Izmir. But in biblical times, Smyrna was considered to be the pride of Asia. And although it wasn't as big and as bold as the city of Ephesus, Smyrna had a natural harbour.

It's got this beautiful bay, if you ever see pictures of it. And it had a flourishing export trade. And in comparison to Ephesus, which boasted, you remember, it boasted of its great and glorious temple to the goddess Artemis.

[6 : 33] Smyrna, in the city of Smyrna, they boasted of their great and glorious theatre. They had this great amphitheatre. And they also boasted of the fact that Smyrna was the birthplace of the Greek poet Homer.

I don't know if you read much about Homer. But Smyrna was a beautiful place. It had magnificent architecture. It had lots of grand temples, not as big as the temple in Ephesus.

But it had grand temples to all these Greek gods and goddesses. It was a city that was refined in its Greek culture. But it was also a city that was distinctly and decidedly pagan in its religion.

Therefore, any religion that challenged or contradicted their Greek culture was not welcome. And this was certainly true about Christianity.

Christianity was not welcome in the city of Smyrna. There was a big keep-out sign for Christians in the city of Smyrna. And over time, the tension with Christianity and the city of Smyrna, it intensified.

[7 : 44] It increased because the city of Smyrna had this strong tie because it was part of the Roman Empire. And Smyrna's ties with the Roman Empire, they were so strong, like many other cities in Asia.

Their ties were so strong that it was dictated to them and demanded from them that the Roman Emperor had to be worshipped as a god.

And of course, this demand and this dictation, it went directly against the grain of the gospel.

Because as you know, the creed and the confession of the Christian is, Jesus is Lord.

That's our confession. Jesus is Lord. But the Roman Empire always dictated and demanded that everyone living within the Roman Empire must concede and confess Kaiser Curios.

Caesar is Lord. But if you resisted, if you refused this dictation and demand of the Roman Empire, you were either exiled or you were executed.

[8 : 56] But of course, for the Christian to concede and confess Kaiser Curios, Caesar is Lord, they would be denying their Saviour. They would be denouncing their faith.

The faith that Jesus, Jesus alone is Lord. And you know, there was this memorable martyr in the early church, very interesting man to read about.

He's one who resisted the Roman Empire. He refused to concede and confess. Kaiser, Curios, Caesar is Lord. His name was Polycarp, if you've ever heard of him.

Polycarp is a fascinating figure in church history, especially in relation to this church, the church in Smyrna. Because Polycarp was the pastor of the church in Smyrna.

In fact, Polycarp was the pastor of the church in Smyrna when John forwarded this letter to the church in Smyrna. And so when we read verse 8, where it says, to the angel of the church in Smyrna, the angel or the messenger or the pastor of the church in Smyrna was in fact Polycarp, this man.

[10 : 14] But what's interesting is that Polycarp had been taught and trained by the apostle John. John, you remember, he went to stay in Ephesus, 35 miles south.

And so, Polycarp was John's apprentice. Polycarp was trained and taught by the apostle John. John passed down the teaching of Jesus to this young man, Polycarp. And Polycarp became the pastor of the church in Ephesus when he was in his 20s. He's a young man. And Polycarp, as I said, he's a fascinating figure in church history. Because in 156 AD, after being a pastor in Smyrna for over 60 years, and after 50 years after this letter had been delivered to the church in Smyrna, Polycarp was martyred for his faith in the city of Smyrna.

He was martyred in the amphitheater in front of thousands of people. And some of the eyewitness accounts state that on the day of his execution, Polycarp asked for one thing.

[11 : 21] He only asked for one thing. Two hours of prayer with his congregation. You know what a request on the day of your death. Two hours of prayer with his congregation, which they granted.

Polycarp was then tied to the stake with the Roman governor. He commanded Polycarp to concede and confess, like everybody else, Kaiser Curios, Caesar is Lord.

In fact, the Roman governor, he said to Polycarp, he said, Polycarp, I have respect for you in your old age. Swear just once. Renounce Christ and I will release you.

And Polycarp replied, Polycarp said, for 86 years, I have been his servant and he has never done me any wrong.

How can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour? And with that, Polycarp confessed, as every Christian confesses, Jesus ha Curios.

[12 : 28] Jesus is Lord. And so they burned him at the stake. Undoubtedly, Polycarp, he was a faithful pastor. He was a faithful preacher to the people at Smyrna.

But he was also a fearless example of what it is to stand up for your faith in Jesus Christ. And you know, this is the fearless faith, fearless faith that this risen and ruling and reigning King commends the church commends the church in Smyrna for.

He commends them there as we read in verse 9. He says, 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.

Jesus commends the church in Smyrna for their fearless faith, despite the opposition, despite the obstacles that they were facing. Because the thing is, their opposition was not only from the Roman Empire where they had to concede and confess Kaiser Curios that Caesar is Lord.

Their opposition was also from the Jewish synagogue. We'll read about that in verse 9. There was opposition from the local Jewish synagogue. Now, as you know, Christianity, it originated from Judaism.

[13 : 51] You could say Jesus himself was a Jew. And for many years during its infancy, this small church here in Smyrna, it enjoyed the same immunity as the Jews in Smyrna.

because within the Roman Empire, Jews were excused and they were exempt from having to concede and confess Kaiser Curios, Caesar as Lord.

And for a time, for a period, the Christian church in Smyrna enjoyed the same privilege. They didn't have to concede and confess Kaiser Curios.

But towards the end of the first century, when this letter was written, both the Roman Empire and the Jewish synagogue, they began to disown themselves, disown the Christians and even desert them and all these Christians in Smyrna.

To the point that there was not only opposition to the church in Smyrna, there were now obstacles for the church in Smyrna. Because the church in Smyrna was being persecuted by Rome and it was also being punished by the Jews.

[15 : 00] They were being punished through poverty. They were punished through poverty. That's what Jesus means when he says to them in verse 9, he says, I know your tribulation and I know your poverty.

I know your poverty. Smyrna was one of the wealthiest cities in the ancient world. But Christians in the city of Smyrna were poor.

They were all poor. But the Christians were poor not because they were lazy or lethargic in their work ethic. They were poor because they were being ignored and isolated by their community.

And it was all because of their Christian faith. The Christians in Smyrna were poor because Christian businesses or businesses that were run by Christians, they collapsed.

People didn't go to their shop. People refused to trade with them. Other people refused to work for them. They were also refused work when they were seeking it.

[16:06] They lost their jobs because they were Christians, because of the hostility and the hatred that people had towards Jesus Christ. And yet here, Jesus commends them.

Despite their poverty, Jesus commends the church in Smyrna for their fearlessness and their faithfulness. And Jesus reminds them, even in their poverty, even in their earthly poverty, he reminds them that they have heavenly riches.

I know your tribulation, he says, and your poverty, but you are rich. Remember that you are rich. Jesus was telling them what he told the crowds in the Sermon on the Mount.

He told them that despite the obstacles and the opposition that the church in Smyrna was facing, they are still laying up for themselves treasures in heaven.

Treasures that are incorruptible, undefiled, that fade not away, but are reserved in heaven for them. I know your tribulation and your poverty, but you are rich.

[17:16] And you know, looking at first century Smyrna, in many ways, it's no different to 21st century Scotland. Although we might not be commanded by the Roman Empire to concede and confess Kaiser Curios, I often do think that we're being commanded by our government and our media and many other things to concede and confess that LGBT is Curios.

It is Lord over our nation, a nation that rules for the 1%. And just like it was in first century Smyrna, Christians are opposed and ostracised in 21st century Scotland.

I'm sure we've all been acutely aware of what's been said over the past couple of weeks about Kate Forbes. With Kate Forbes, she's experienced opposition, she's encountered obstacles, even she's been ostracised because she's a Christian.

To us, she's a sister in Christ, she's a member in our denomination, she's one who loves the Lord, she loves his word, she's willing to stand up for the truth and speak out for what she believes and she does it honestly with integrity.

And as Stephen was praying, it reminds me of Daniel standing up and speaking out, it reminds me of that hymn, Dare to be a Daniel, Dare to stand alone, Dare to have a purpose firm and dare to make it known.

[18:50] You know, in an article from Christian Today, David Robertson, who's now in Australia, he was in Dundee, he wrote, this is what he wrote, he said, with a Hindu as the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and a Muslim as the Mayor of London, it would seem that the UK is at last fulfilling the promise of a multicultural society.

Yet, events in Scotland suggest that there is one group banned from meaningful political leadership, Christians who actually believe what Jesus says.

Undoubtedly, Kate Forbes has been victimised and vilified not because of her politics or her policies, but her personal faith in Jesus Christ.

But you know, what's been the saddest thing of all is that other MPs and MSPs that I'm not going to start naming and shaming, they don't share her views because they don't have the same backbone as her.

But I think what's worse was like it was in first century Smyrna where there were Jews who disowned and detached themselves from the Christians in Smyrna to the point that Jesus calls them there in verse 9 the synagogue of Satan.

[20:11] In 21st century Scotland we have the national kirk, the Church of Scotland with all its pushes and promotions and parades of the secular ideologies of the day.

Their former moderator Lorna Hood, I don't know if you saw what she wrote, she proudly and publicly stated in opposition to Kate Forbes' Christian view or the biblical view that the largest church in Scotland, the Church of Scotland, allows same-sex marriage and allows ministers to conduct same-sex marriages.

Do you know, if that isn't something to what the first century Smyrna experienced, I don't know what is. And yet what I love is what Jesus does here.

He commends the Christians in Smyrna. He commends those who are persecuted for their faith. He gives them a word of commendation and then also a word of consolation.

That's what we see secondly. A word of consolation. He says there in verse 10, 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.

[21 : 32] 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.

Do you know, when facing persecution and punishment for your faith, who better to encourage you? Who better to exhort you to press on and persevere than Jesus himself?

And what better word of comfort and consolation could Jesus give to his people than the well-known words he said to many people throughout his ministry, Do not fear.

Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Do not fear. In his commentary on the book of Revelation, it's a brilliant commentary, Dr. Joel Beakey, he writes in his commentary, he says, By telling the Smyrnaian Christians not to fear this trial, Christ is saying that he will be with them even in prison. He was the fourth one who walked in the fiery furnace with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Eternity itself, he says, will reveal how many prison cells in church history were sanctified by the prayers, praises and tears of faithful believers who were poor in this world's goods but rich in Christ.

[23 : 06] And that's so true because in the 21st century it's said that there are 360 million Christians in the world who are persecuted for their faith.

That works out at one in seven. One in seven Christians. A few years ago it was one in twelve which shows that the persecution of Christians is on the rise year on year.

But the Christian charity Open Doors which has been supporting persecuted Christians in over 50 countries for the past 60 years on their website if you ever go to the Open Doors website it's quite a read they state that 5,621 Christians were killed for their faith last year 2022 which is approximately 15 a day.

89% of the deaths took place in Nigeria. Last year 2,110 churches were attacked with almost half of them in China.

North Korea still remains the most dangerous place to live as a Christian. And I don't know if you've ever seen it if you go onto the website the Open Doors website they have what they call a world watch list.

[24 : 28] a world watch list where they give to you the top 50 most persecuted places in the world. And if you want something to pray about there's 50 places to pray for.

I'll just give you just to give you an idea I'll give you the top 10. Number 1 is North Korea Number 2 is Somalia Number 3 is Yemen Number 4 Eritrea Number 5 is Libya Number 6 Nigeria Number 7 Pakistan My brother-in-law's sister is a missionary in Pakistan a very dangerous place. Number 8 is Iran Number 9 is Afghanistan and number 10 is Sudan. And yet whether in 1st century Smyrna or 21st century Somalia Jesus gives a word of consolation to each and every one of his people.

That's what these churches are teaching us. They're not just for the 1st century. They are applied to the 21st century church. And Jesus says to them Do not fear. Do not fear what you're about to suffer.

Behold the devil is about to throw some of you into prison that you may be tested and for 10 days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life.

[25 : 57] I will give you the crown of life. And you know when we hear about the persecuted church whether in the 1st century or the 21st century I don't know about you but I often think well I don't know I'm living.

I don't know I'm living because I don't know what it is to be persecuted for my faith in Jesus Christ. I'm thankful I don't. The way things are going in our nation I don't think it's far away.

But you know it should give us a burden for the persecuted church. It should remind us that we should always be praying for them. Jesus mentions them in the Beatitudes. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

So we're to prayerfully and practically support persecuted Christians. Charities that help persecuted Christians such as Open Doors and also Steadfast Global which is more local to us.

And you know this is why Jesus says at the end of each letter to the seven churches. That's why he says in that closing verse he who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

[27 : 12] He who has an ear let him hear. You know it's a call for the whole church. As we said all these seven churches they represent or they're symbolic of a message to the whole church in every century.

So it's a call for the whole church not just that specific church but the whole church to respond. It's a call for the whole church to listen to what the Lord is saying.

Because how you hear affects your heart. how you hear affects your heart. And don't you find it remarkable that the first time Jesus issued that call to respond he who has an ear to hear let him hear.

The first time Jesus issued that call to respond was when he told his most well-known parable the parable of the sower. But as you know the parable of the sower it's not actually about the sower or the seed.

The parable is all about the soil and onto what type of soil the seed fell. Because each soil it represents a soil that responded differently to the sown seed of God's word.

[28 : 32] When the sower scattered the seed Jesus tells us some fell by the wayside others onto rocky ground some among thorns and some into the good soil. Each soil responded differently to the sown seed.

Which is why Jesus concludes the parable of the sower with our call to respond he who has an ear to hear let him hear.

He who has an ear to hear let him hear. Because how you hear emphasizes Jesus. How you hear affects your heart.

How you hear affects your heart. And as you know the parable of the sower Jesus is asking us the question how's your heart? We've looked at that parable many times before.

Jesus is asking the question how's your heart? Is it a hardened heart where the seed falls by the wayside? Is it a hollow heart where it falls into the rocky ground? Is it a hungry heart where it falls among the thorns?

[29 : 32] Or is it a healthy heart where it falls into the good soil? How's your heart? Because how you hear affects your heart. And that's what Jesus is asking us here as the church.

He's addressing the whole church and he's saying to us right at the end of every message to every church he's saying how you hear this will affect your heart. How are you going to respond to what I'm saying?

And so having given a word of commendation and a word of consolation to the church in Smyrna Jesus is asking us how are you going to respond to this?

And he says he says to us as a church as a whole church do not fear what you're 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.

Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life. How are we going to respond? Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life.

[30 : 47] Keep pressing on. Keep persevering. Keep going even in the midst of persecution. When there's obstacles when there's opposition when you're ostracized for your faith when you're opposed by other people keep pressing on.

Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life because how you hear will affect your heart. So Jesus says he who has an ear to hear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death. So that's the church in Smyrna. So how we hear this message will affect our heart.

So may it affect our heart that we respond in prayer for the persecuted church. But may the Lord bless these thoughts to us. Let us pray.

O Lord our God we give thanks to thee for thy word and that thy word is so relevant to us. We bless thee that it is living that it is active that it remains sharp and Lord we pray that even as we consider it that thy word would pierce our heart that it would cause us to respond for as Jesus said he who has an ear to hear let him hear and Lord how we hear affects our heart help us Lord to have an ear to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches that we would be prayerful for our our brothers and sisters in Christ who are persecuted those who are persecuted for righteousness sake for those who stand up for the name of Jesus those who are willing to to stand up and to shine for Christ Lord that thou would us protect thy people uphold them

[32 : 48] Lord that we would all have those words imprinted upon our minds that be faithful unto death and that we shall receive the crown of life O Lord bless thy truth to us then we pray bless us in our homes and our families help us to be faithful witnesses witnesses in the workplace witnesses in our community help us Lord we ask to always to be ready to give an answer for the reason for the hope that is within us because Lord in a hopeless world a world that is looking for hope we have a hope that is sure and steadfast a hope that is the anchor of our soul Lord do us good and we pray give to us a boldness in our day to stand up for Jesus to speak out for him to shine in this dark world

go before us we ask keep us we pray for we ask it in Jesus name and for his sake Amen we're going to bring our service to a conclusion this evening we're going to sing in

Psalm 143 Psalm 143 in the Scottish Psalter the second version of the Psalm page 439 Psalm 143 singing from verse 6 down to the verse marked 8 Lord let my prayer prevail to answer it make speed for lo my spirit doth fail hide not thy face in need lest I be like to those that do in darkness sit or him that downward goes into the dreadful pit we'll sing down to the verse marked 8 of Psalm 143 to God's praise song though I do stretch my hands to thee

I have followed for the world on the sands so I go pale and hold my thirsting so desire and long after thee as thirsting and required with grain refresh to thee Lord let my prayer prevail to answer it makes speed for though my spirit doth fail hide not thy face in need lest

I be like to those that do in darkness sit or him that inward goes into the dreadful pit because I trust in thee O Lord cause me to hear thy loving kindness free when morning doth appear cause me to know the way where in my path should be for why my soul on high

I do lift up to thee the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ the love of God the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and forever more Amen