

Smyrna: The Persecuted Church

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[0 : 0 0] Well, if you would turn with me this evening to the book of Revelation. The book of Revelation in chapter 2, page 1236.

Page 1236, Revelation chapter 2. And we're looking at the church in Smyrna. So it's Revelation chapter 2 at verse 8.

Where Jesus says, 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. To the one who conquers, the one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.

What would Jesus say about your church? What would Jesus say about your church?

[1 : 3 7] That's the title of one of the commentaries I'm using as we study the seven churches in the book of Revelation. What would Jesus say about your church?

And you know, it's a searching question. It's a solemn question. It's a sobering question. What would Jesus say about Barvis Free Church? What would Jesus say about the spiritual health and condition of Barvis Free Church?

Would he commend us? Or would he condemn us? Would he comfort us? Or would he have concerns about us? Well, as we said last week, these letters to the seven churches in Revelation were to view them as the results of a spiritual health check.

Jesus, he's the great physician of souls, and he's here giving seven churches, these seven churches, he's giving them the results of their spiritual condition. And some of the things that Dr. Jesus has discovered, they need to be rectified immediately.

Or else they will have detrimental effects upon the spiritual well-being of the church. And as we said before, the reason Jesus is giving the results of a spiritual health check is because Jesus has a care and he has a concern for the spiritual well-being of his church.

[3 : 0 4] Jesus loves the church. He gave himself for the church. He washed and freed the church from their sins by his own blood. And now as the risen and exalted and glorified Savior, Jesus, he is the king and head of his own church.

And Jesus, he wants his church to be faithful and he wants his church to be obedient in a world that is hostile to the gospel. And as we said, that's the reason the book of Revelation was written.

The book of Revelation is all about revealing Jesus Christ as this exalted and reigning Savior. And the book of Revelation, it's a call to the church to live faithful and obedient lives in the face of opposition and even persecution.

And so as we saw last week, John was commanded by Jesus to write to these churches the results of their spiritual health check. And along with the description of their spiritual condition, Jesus prescribes the necessary remedy in order to encourage them to be faithful and obedient.

And as we said, the reason there are seven churches that are mentioned here is that these seven churches, they represent the whole church of Christ.

[4 : 24] Therefore, the letters to the seven churches, they apply to every church in every generation. They apply to us. And they're an important message sent to us by Jesus Christ.

And you know, what we have to keep remembering as we go through this study of these seven letters, what we have to remember is that Barb is free church. It belongs to Jesus Christ.

And Dr. Jesus, our Savior, he has a care and a concern for the spiritual well-being of our church. Therefore, we have to take heed to the results of these spiritual health checks so that we will apply all the prescribed remedies to our own congregation here.

And that we will seek to be faithful and obedient to Jesus Christ. And so as we saw last week, we considered at the beginning of chapter two, we considered the letter to the church in Ephesus.

And we said that the letter to the church in Ephesus, it contained a word of commendation, a word of condemnation, and a word of consolation. That's the basic structure that's used for most of the letters.

[5 : 35] But this evening, as we consider the church in Smyrna, the church in Smyrna, as we said, is a persecuted church. But what's interesting about the church in Smyrna is that because of their persecution, they were one of the most faithful of all of the seven churches.

In fact, alongside the church of Philadelphia, which we'll come to in a few weeks' time, the church in Smyrna, it was so faithful that Jesus doesn't have a word of condemnation for them.

He did for the church in Ephesus. But he doesn't have anything, he doesn't have a word of condemnation for the church in Smyrna. Jesus only has a word of commendation and a word of consolation.

And so these are our headings this evening. A word of commendation and a word of consolation. So if we look first of all at Jesus' word of commendation, look what he says in verse eight.

Jesus says, And as it was with all the churches, the recipient of the letter is the angel of the church.

[7 : 13] And as we said last week, the angel of the church, it isn't a guardian angel, it isn't a spirit within the church. The angel of the church is the pastor of the church. Because the word angel can also be translated as messenger.

And that's what the pastor of the church is. He's God's messenger to God's people. The pastor's responsibility is to bring the word of God to the people of God. And the spiritual health and the spiritual condition of a church, it's the responsibility of a pastor.

Of the pastor. Of course, the elders, as we said before, they have a vital role in the spiritual oversight of a congregation. But it's the duty of the pastor to lead, to shepherd, to challenge, to encourage his congregation to live faithful and obedient lives.

It's the pastor's responsibility to ensure that his people are being fed and taught the word of God correctly. And that's why Jesus addresses the letter to the angel of the church.

Because it's the messenger's responsibility. It's the pastor's responsibility to deliver the message of Jesus to the church of Jesus Christ. But you know, notice how Jesus describes himself to the church of Jesus.

[8 : 33] He describes himself to the church in Smyrna as the first and the last who died and came to life. And you know, it seems that this self-description of Jesus, it was fitting for the situation the church in Smyrna was facing.

Because when you're being persecuted by those you grew up with, and you're being hated because you love Jesus, and you can't get a job because you're a Christian, and you're rejected by everyone else around you, and being executed for your faith is a real possibility.

And when all these things are going on in your life, we see here that Jesus reminds the Christians in Smyrna, I am the first and the last, he who died and came to life.

In the face of persecution and possible death, Jesus reminds them that he is sovereign in their situation. He is the first and the last.

He has appointed all that they will experience and encounter for his name's sake. And if they must face death, they have the hope of the resurrection.

[9 : 42] Because as Jesus says, who is the captain of their salvation, he says that he died and came to life. He is the resurrection and the life. And you know, what better comfort to have than knowing that Jesus understands all that you're going through.

That Jesus understands all the slandering, all the hatred, all the pain, all the hurt, all the heartache. Jesus knows it all and Jesus understands it all. We began a study in the letter to the Hebrews this morning.

And that's what the writer to the Hebrews repeatedly reminded those Jewish Christians who were being persecuted for their faith in Jesus Christ. He urged them again and again to hold fast their confession.

Because they have a great high priest who understands all their feelings and all their infirmities. And he says to them that Jesus, our great high priest, he was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.

Therefore, he says, let us come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need. And you know, the wonder of it all is, my friend, that we have the same hope and the same promise being held out to us by the same Jesus.

[11 : 06] Because Jesus is one who says to us that he knows what's going on in our life. And he understands what's going on in our life. Even when everyone else doesn't know what's going on in our lives.

And when no one else understands what we're going through and what we're facing and all the struggles that we have in life. This is the wonder of it all. Jesus knows. And Jesus understands.

And that's what Jesus repeatedly reminds these churches. He repeats this phrase, I know your works. I know, he says in verse 9, your tribulation and your poverty.

I know. And for the Christians in Smyrna, it would have been a great encouragement to them that Jesus commends them for enduring persecution and experiencing poverty and being subject to blasphemy.

And in the midst of all that they're going through, it must have been very reassuring to read these words from Jesus. I know your tribulation. I know what you're going through.

[12 : 11] And I'm always with you in it. But you know, what exactly was the church of Smyrna going through? What were they facing as a church?

Well, to understand that, we have to just understand a little of the context of Smyrna. The city of Smyrna is known today as Izmir, which is located on the west coast of modern-day Turkey.

It's about 35 miles north of where the church in Ephesus was. So the church in Smyrna, it wasn't as large as Ephesus, or the city of Smyrna, it wasn't as large as Ephesus.

But Ephesus, it couldn't compete with the splendor of Smyrna. There were ancient coins that were often used in Smyrna. And they had printed on them the words, the first of Asia in beauty and size.

Smyrna was known as the pride of Asia, which is modern-day Turkey. It was the pride of Asia. Smyrna had this natural harbor, and it was a flourishing, it had a flourishing export trade.

[13 : 21] So the name of the city, you could actually say the name of the city says it all, Smyrna. It means costly perfume, which only highlights the wealth and the refined living of those who lived in this city.

But Smyrna had also boasted that it was the birthplace of Homa. You've heard of Homer, the greatest of all the Greek poets. Smyrna had also demonstrated its beauty with all its stunning architecture and its theaters and libraries and stadiums.

But regardless of its outward beauty, the heart of the people in Smyrna was pagan. Pagan temples and statues dedicated to the latest gods and goddesses.

These things, they just dominated the skyline. You could see them everywhere. They were all around them. There was two big temples at either end of the city. But more than that, as a city with ties to the Roman Empire, it was illegal to refuse to worship the emperor.

By law, the emperor had to be worshipped as a god in Smyrna. But interestingly, by the end of the first century, there were many Jews living in Smyrna.

[14 : 36] But the pagans and the Jews, they lived in harmony. They lived in harmony with one another, so much so that the Jews, they actually received immunity when it came to emperor worship.

The Jews were excused from having to offer incense to the altar before the emperor's image. And they were excused from having to confess Caesar as lord.

And the Jews, they held esteem among the pagan people of Smyrna. Because when this great influx of Jews came, they caused the city of Smyrna to flourish.

So, the pagans, they were very thankful for the Jews. And they lived happily with the Jews. The pagans and the Jews, they lived well together. But the Christians were always a thorn in their side.

And both pagans and Jews, they were opposed to the Christians. The Jews had completely disowned the Christians. They said that they undermined the truths of the Bible.

[15 : 37] And without the privilege of immunity, the pagans, they, well, they hated the Christians. They viewed them as guilty of treason and blasphemy. Because the Christians refused to worship their pagan gods.

And they refused to offer incense to the emperor. The Christians in Smyrna, although they were very small and very fragile, they refused to confess Caesar as lord.

Because they would only confess Jesus as lord. And you know, the Christians in Smyrna, they were condemned for their faith. But Jesus commended them.

Jesus commended them. And you know, it should be a reminder to us that the more we seek to please Jesus, and gain his approval, and honour his name, the more we will antagonise and infuriate the world around us.

We're seeing that at present. Even in our own nation, with the Asher's Bakery case, it's now reached the Supreme Court. And the Christian Institute, they're helping the MacArthur family to stand firm for the name of Christ.

[16 : 47] And we should continue to pray for them, that the Lord would help them and strengthen them at this time. But you know, what the case, this case that the Christian Institute are involved in, what this case has really demonstrated, is the hatred that there is for Jesus Christ and his people.

They hate the Christian. But you know, as one commentator says, we can't expect to be patted on the back for our testimony of Christ.

The more we become like Christ, the more we can expect persecution. The world can admire goodness, but it can't stand godliness.

And you know, it's so true. The world will never love the Christian when they stand up for the truth of the gospel, and for the name of Jesus. Jesus said this in John 15.

He says, If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own. But because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore, the world hates you.

[17 : 58] And that was the experience of the Christians in Smyrna. They were hated by the world, condemned by the world, but Jesus commends them for standing firm, and for being faithful and obedient, even in the midst of persecution.

And listen to what Jesus says in verse 9. 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.

And as we said, at the time, Smyrna was one of the wealthiest cities in the ancient world. It was the pride of Asia. But the Christians there, they were poor.

They were poor because of the hostility they faced. Many of the Christians, they lost their jobs because they refused to worship the emperor. Others suffered in their business, whatever their business was, they suffered because the pagans and the Jews, they took their trade elsewhere.

The Christians in Smyrna were poor. But Jesus says, you're rich. You are rich. You are children of the king.

[19 : 12] They are children of the king. They are rich because they have remained through to their confession. It had cost them dearly to be a Christian. But Jesus commends them for laying up treasures in heaven.

And as I know what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt and thieves cannot break in and steal.

And then Jesus reminds us, he says, where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. And for the believers in Smyrna, their heart was in heaven with Jesus.

They were looking beyond this world and beyond their persecution, beyond their suffering. And they were looking to what lay ahead for them. They were looking to their inheritance that was incorruptible, undefiled, that fades not away, reserved in heaven for them.

They were looking to Jesus because they knew that all this, that this world had for them was poverty and blasphemy. If it wasn't enough to be poor, the Christians in Smyrna, they were repeatedly slandered for not falling into line with everyone else.

[20 : 38] And worst of all, it was the Jews who were persecuting them. They were repeatedly, repeatedly accusing them of being disloyal to the emperor. They had immunity. And yet they were slandering the Christians, saying, you should be worshipping the emperor.

But as Jesus commends the church in Smyrna, he reminds them that the people who are persecuting them, they're not really Jews. They're not the Lord's people. But they're being used by Satan to accomplish his purposes.

He says they are of the synagogue of Satan. They worship Satan. That's what he says. And you know, it should emphasize to us that persecution, it always comes from Satan.

He is the great divider, the enemy of our soul. You see that with Job in the Old Testament. Satan tested Job's faithfulness.

It was the case with Jesus. Satan entered into the heart of Judas Iscariot, and the results were devastating. But here, Jesus, he commends his church for responding to their persecution with gentleness and faithfulness.

[21 : 50] Even though the church in Smyrna was reviled, they did not revile in return. And that's what Peter had told them to do. He wrote his letter, as we read earlier on in 1 Peter 2.

He wrote his letter to the persecuted churches of the first century. And he reminded them by saying, Christ suffered for us, leaving us an example that you should follow in his steps.

He committed no sin, nor was deceit found in his mouth. And when he was reviled, he did not revile in return. When he suffered, he did not threaten, but committed himself to him who judges justly.

And that's what the church in Smyrna was doing. They were being faithful and obedient in their Christian witness. And for that, Jesus commends them. Jesus commends them.

But what's remarkable is that although the church in Smyrna was small and although they were oppressed by poverty and persecution, they abounded spiritually. The more the church in Smyrna was battered, the more the church in Smyrna was blessed.

[23 : 04] And this is the wonder of it. The more they were battered, the more they were blessed. And that's because persecution, it often brings faithfulness, obedience, and blessing.

That's what some of us saw on Tuesday night at the Bible study. We watched an episode from the Discipleship Explored DVD. And the opening scene, we're all sitting watching it, it was, the opening scene was of a Christian minister from Serbia.

And he was saying that he was praying for persecution to come to the West. He's praying for persecution to come to Britain so that we will know the sweetness of Christ.

because he believes that the only way, the only way that we will seek the commendation of Christ is through persecution. The only way we will be faithful and obedient is through persecution.

And you know, when we look at the church in the West today, our nation, to me it seems that the commendation of the world is far more important than the commendation of Christ.

[24 : 19] And you know, we have to take it to ourselves and ask, well, as a congregation, are we seeking to be praised by the world? Or are we seeking to be faithful to Jesus Christ?

Are we seeking to be praised by those who have no interest in Christ? Or are we seeking to be faithful to this Jesus who loved us and gave himself for us?

And so the church in Smyrna, they received a word of commendation. But they also received a word of consolation. That's what I'd like us to see secondly, a word of consolation.

Now look at verse 10. Jesus says, 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.

Now the ten days, it's not, it's symbolic. It means that it'll come to an end. It's a period. So for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life.

[25 : 23] 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. You know, persecution and suffering, it has been part of the church since the beginning.

The king and head of the church, Jesus Christ, he was crucified for the message he proclaimed. And those who followed him, they suffered persecution for their faith.

All the apostles, apart from one, they all died a martyr's death. The apostles Peter and Bartholomew, they were crucified upside down.

Andrew was crucified on an X-shaped cross, hence the St. Andrew's cross. Matthew died by the sword in Ethiopia. Thomas was pierced with a spear.

Simon the zealot was sawn in two. Both Matthias and Paul, they were beheaded. And Philip was said to have died by hanging. All the apostles suffered a martyr's death, apart from John.

[26 : 32] John, as we read here in the book of Revelation, he was known to have died of natural causes while he was exiled on the island of Patmos where he received this revelation.

But for the most part, suffering and persecution was commonplace in the early church. If you confessed the name of Christ, you were signing your death warrant. If you read, if you've ever read the Fox's book of martyrs, written by John Fox, it's a brilliant book.

He was an English historian in the 16th century. And you know, he describes many of the awful punishments and cruelties that martyrs faced for their faith in Jesus Christ. He talks about their imprisonment, racking, searing, boiling, burning, scourging, stoning, and hanging.

But you know, the reality is, my friend, this kind of suffering and this kind of persecution, persecution, it isn't confined to the first century because it continues to this day.

In fact, it's estimated that in the 21st century, one in 12 Christians in the world are being persecuted for their faith. The Christian charity Open Doors, which has been helping persecuted Christians for the past 60 years, they work in over 50 countries all over the world and they supply Bibles, they train church leaders, they provide practical help, they provide emergency relief, they support Christians who are suffering for their faith.

[28 : 07] And last November, the Open Doors charity, it estimated that today there are 215 million Christians who are being persecuted for their faith.

the most dangerous place to be as a Christian is North Korea. But they say that the number one cause of Christian persecution in the world is the spread of radical Islam.

And you know, out of the top 10 countries with the highest rate of persecution, Islamic oppression fuels that persecution in eight of these top 10 countries.

The countries of Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan, Pakistan, Libya, Iraq, Yemen, and Iran. And you know, my friend, when I read those statistics on the Open Doors website, I thought to myself, I don't know I'm living.

I don't really know what it is to be a Christian because I've never experienced that level of persecution. I'm thankful that I haven't experienced it. I'm thankful that there is still peace in our nation that we have freedom to worship.

[29 : 23] I don't know for how long, but when we consider what other Christians are suffering for the name of Christ, it should give us a burden for them. And it should give us a desire to help them and to pray for them and to support these charities like Open Doors and Steadfast Global that Malcolm McLeod is involved in.

But you know, what these Christians experienced in the first century and what they experience today in the 21st century, that's what the church in Smyrna faced as well. But as we said, these seven letters to the church, they apply to the whole church.

And so these words of consolation, they apply to the whole church of Jesus Christ in every century. And you know, I love what Jesus says here because he knows, as we said before, he knows exactly what the church is going through.

He understands what they're experiencing. He knows it all. And then he says to them in verse 10, do not fear what you are about to suffer. Do not fear.

You know, what better words of comfort and consolation could you ever hear from the lips of Jesus than the words do not fear. Although imprisonment, tribulation, and death may come, Jesus, he says to his church, do not fear.

[30 : 43] I will give you the crown of life because the one who perseveres will not be hurt by the second death, meaning hell. Do not fear.

And you know, in these words of consolation, Jesus encourages the believers in Smyrna to persevere in their faith. You know, the wonder of it all is that history tells us that they did just that.

they persevered in their faith. I'm sure you've heard of the name Polycarp. He was one of the most well-known Christian martyrs.

He was actually a member in the church in Smyrna. In fact, Polycarp was the minister in Smyrna. What's interesting is that he was ordained by the apostle John when John was the minister in Ephesus.

And Polycarp, he was in his twenties when this letter came to the church in Smyrna. But he died as a martyr at the age of 86. And when asked if he had any requests before they would take him and have him tried and executed, he was asked, do you have any requests?

[31 : 57] And Polycarp, he asked to have two hours of prayer with his congregation. His request, it was granted. And then two weeks later, they came back for him and they led Polycarp into the great amphitheater in Smyrna to put him to death before thousands of spectators.

But just before his execution, Polycarp was, he was given one more opportunity to confess Caesar as Lord and they said that they would release him. But Polycarp replied by saying, 86 years I have served Christ and he has done me no wrong.

How then can I blaspheme my king and my saviour? So they took him. They were just about to tie him to the stake when Polycarp said, I have one more request.

Leave me unfastened. I will die voluntarily for my master's sake. And his request, they granted it, he couldn't go anywhere anyway.

And as they tried to set Polycarp on fire, he began to pray, O Lord, Almighty God, the Father of Thy beloved Son, Jesus Christ, through whom we have received knowledge of Thee, I thank Thee that Thou hast thought me worthy this day to share the cup of Thy Christ among the number of Thy witnesses.

[33 : 28] And it's said that on hearing Polycarp's prayer, it so angered one of the Roman soldiers who were trying to set him on fire that he took out his sword and put it through him, killing him immediately.

But you know my friend, Polycarp is only one example of the church in Smyrna and those who were faithful unto death. He was only one example of those who followed the words of Jesus, be faithful unto death.

There were many others, there have been many since. There have been many Christians throughout the centuries who have been faithful unto death. And they were faithful and they still remain faithful because they did as Jesus asked.

Do you remember what Jesus said about becoming his disciple? whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.

For whosoever will save his life shall lose it, but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospels, the same shall save it. For what shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?

[34 : 48] Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words, in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him shall the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with his holy angels.

My friend, Jesus has called us to be his disciples. He's called us to deny self, take up our cross and follow after him. And whatever that may entail, we're reminded here as we listen to the letter to the church in Smyrna, that he has a word of commendation and a word of consolation for us.

I know your tribulation, do not fear what you are about to suffer. And so may we seek to be faithful and obedient to this Jesus who loved us and gave himself for us.

may the Lord bless these thoughts to us. Let us pray. O Lord, our gracious God, we give thanks to thee for the church of Jesus Christ, that it belongs to him and to him alone.

And we pray that thou wouldst watch over thy people wherever they are this evening, that thou wouldst gather them under thy wings and protect them, that as the psalmist says, in shadow of thy wings I'll joy, for thou mine help hast been, my soul thee follows hard on me, thy right hand doth sustain, that that would be the experience of thy church throughout the ends of the earth, those who have been persecuted, that they would be kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation, ready to be revealed in the last time.

[36 : 44] Lord, watch over us here, we pray. Help us to be faithful, help us to be obedient, help us to live out our Christian life as we leave this place this evening and as we go into another week.

Help us, Lord, wherever we are, whether it's in work or at home or among our family, help us, Lord, to be faithful, to walk in the footsteps of Jesus and to keep our eyes firmly fixed upon him.

Go before us then, we ask, take away our iniquity, receive us graciously, for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. We shall conclude our service this evening by singing in Psalm 121.

Psalm 121, page 416. Psalm 121.

We'll sing the whole psalm. As we've said before, this is a great reminder. The psalm reminds us that the Lord is our keeper. And who better to keep us than the Lord?

[37 : 58] Because there's one thing for sure, we cannot keep ourselves. The psalmist says, I to the hills will lift mine eyes, from whence doth come my need? My safety cometh from the Lord, who heaven and earth hath made.

Thy foot he'll not let slide, nor will he slumber that he keeps. Behold, he that keeps his room, he slumbers not, nor sleeps. the whole psalm to God's place.

God's name. I should I still lift mine eyes, from whence doth come I is.

My safety cometh from the Lord, who heaven and earth hath made.

Thy good give love, bless thy more will, each slumber that thee keeps.

[39 : 15] He keeps. He holds, he not keeps his fire, he slumbered not nor sleeps.

The Lord thee keeps, the Lord thy shake, on thy right hand of stage.

The earth my life thee shall not smite, nor yet the sun I dare.

my day. The Lord shall keep thy soul, he shall preserve thee from all earth.

Hence forth thy go away, my heart and day, God be forever will.

[40 : 44] The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and forevermore. Amen.