

## Revelation 2:8-11 Smyrna

In 2014, North Korea's Kim Jong-un won an election with a whopping 100% of the vote. This bests his father who only managed a razor thin 99.9% margin of victory. Other dictators such as Saddam Hussein and Syria's Bashar al-Assad have also enjoyed lopsided victories in rigged elections.<sup>i</sup> These results seem ridiculous to those who live with real representative forms of government with real elections. We regard a 53% victory as a landslide.

However, if you were to ask a citizen of late 1<sup>st</sup> Century Smyrna, they wouldn't find this unusual at all. If there had been an election for emperor in Smyrna, the Roman Caesar would have received 100% of the vote.

Smyrna was fiercely loyal to Rome. It was the first city to build a temple to worship the goddess of Rome. Smyrna was the first city in Asia to build a temple to worship Caesar as a god.<sup>ii</sup> By the latter half of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, worshipping the Emperor was not optional; it was the law. And to refuse to worship the emperor could be punishable by death. All of this made life very difficult for these early Christians and the Church at Smyrna.

### Who is Jesus to His Church

**8** Each of the seven letters begins with an image of Jesus that shows who he is to his church. To Smyrna, Jesus says he is the ***first and the last***.

There is a depth to this title that cannot be plumbed here. Jesus is the first. Think of the oldest thing you can think of (Older than Claude). Jesus was there before all of that. He was there before the oldest fossils. He was there before the light from the most distant star ever started its journey. He was there before there were stars. Before there was...He is.

But Jesus is also the last. Nothing will outlast Jesus. After the Energizer Bunny's batteries have run out, after the last star supernovas from existence, Jesus will still be. It is a reminder to the church in Smyrna that no matter what's happening now, it will not last. Who Jesus is will always outlast his enemies.

Jesus also reminds them that he is the one ***who died and came to life***. These Christians are facing prison and even death because of their faith in Christ, and so Jesus reminds them that he

is the one who overcame death. What is the threat of death, ultimately, to one who can overcome it? In these two simple statements, Jesus has declared his mastery over both time and death.

Remember that no matter what you are facing in life, it will not last. The deepest hurt, the harshest treatment, the most insurmountable obstacle from Jesus' point of view is only a temporary blip on the screen. For Jesus, for whom even death is irrelevant, our light and momentary troubles mean nothing.<sup>iii</sup> His promise outweighs whatever you face.

### **Jesus Knows his church**

**9** One of the things that Jesus tells all the churches is *I know*. This shows Jesus' intimacy with his church. He knows what they are doing and what they are going through. That's what love does: it pays attention to what's going on. Sometimes we're not sure he does. Sometimes we wonder if he knows what we're going through. Does he really know the challenges I face? Does he really hear my prayers? That he knows assures us that he really does. In my very first ministry, our church went through a span of just a few months where we had four miscarriages. In a church of 65 people, that's a lot. I was just a young, single guy of only 22 or 23, I didn't have a clue. When that first miscarriage happened, I didn't have any idea how to minister to this couple. But what do you think I did right after the 2<sup>nd</sup> lady had a miscarriage? I called the first. We had this situation where these ladies ministered to one another in their hurt and their loss. They could look at each other and say, "I know."

This is definitely the sense of Jesus' words to the church in Smyrna. Jesus tells them *I know your tribulation and poverty*. His words to Ephesus contained both comfort and warning, his words here to Smyrna are words of comfort. This is a church that is hurting. The word "tribulation" here literally means crushed. It was used of winepresses where the grapes were crushed, and the juice squeezed out. Have you ever felt like that? The refusal of Christians in Smyrna to worship the emperor was leading to their tribulation. They were being crushed from all sides. Some of us have faced some hardship for our faith. Maybe there's some ridicule or social exclusion at school. Some of us have given up a job because it violated our Christian standards.

But even with these trials, we don't know the kind of persecution the church in Smyrna was facing— the kind of tribulations that many Christians throughout the world live with every day.

Consider this example. Asian Access (A2), a Christian missions agency in South Asia, has listed a series of questions church planters are now asking potential converts who are considering baptism. This is a part of the world where the Christian faith is spreading but persecution is intensifying. Here's what's at stake for new converts.

1. Are you willing to leave home and lose the blessing of your father?
2. Are you willing to lose your job?
3. Are you willing to forgive those who persecute you and share the love of Christ with them?
4. Are you willing to give an offering to the Lord?
5. Are you willing to be beaten rather than deny your faith?
6. Are you willing to go to prison?
7. Are you willing to die for Jesus?<sup>iv</sup>

How many of would be willing to say, "Yeah, sign me up." When we to convert people here in the states, we try to convince them of all the blessings and benefits of being saved. How would altar calls and invitations change if we asked these questions?

In addition to their tribulation, Smyrna also suffered from extreme *poverty*. Even though they lived in a very wealthy city, since they didn't worship the emperor, Christians in Smyrna were barred from trade and jobs. They faced fines and harassment.

They had nothing as individuals. They had nothing as a church. It was a struggle just to have bread to eat. But what does Jesus tell them? ***You are rich***. Your external, physical circumstances are not necessarily an indication of God's blessing in your life. Too often we associate riches with God's approval and blessing. Sometimes, the opposite is true. Smyrna was a church that had very few material blessings, but spiritually, they had great abundance.

When Jesus comes back, what house you live in, what clothes you wear, what kind of car you drive, what investments you have won't matter. But Jesus' point isn't just that wealth is irrelevant. In some ways, there will be a great reversal of fortunes. When Jesus comes to deliver the crown of life, your rickety house, your beater of a car, your threadbare clothes will no longer be an indication that you are impoverished or unsuccessful or that you received your

degree from the school of hard knocks. The only trophy that will matter is your relationship with Jesus, and if you have Jesus you will be very rich indeed.

How do you measure your riches? Is it by the kind of smartphone you have? Is it your income? Your savings? Is it by how much property you own? Is it where you can go and what you can do on vacation? Or do you measure your riches by the fact that Jesus has reconciled you to God and made you his child. He's the one that owns the cattle on a thousand hills. He has promised you the world, and life and all things as an eternal inheritance (1 Cor. 3:21-23).

It wasn't just the Romans and civil authorities that were persecuting the church in Smyrna. Jesus says he also knows ***the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan***. Smyrna was home to a large Jewish population.<sup>v</sup> The earliest persecution of the church came not from the Romans, but from the Jews who refused to believe in Jesus as their promised Messiah. History fills in some of the details for us. The Jews had been granted a special exemption from Rome, so they didn't have to worship the emperor. In the earliest days of the church, Rome viewed Christians under the Jewish umbrella, so they were granted the same exemption. However, the Jews no longer let the Christians meet in the synagogue and started denouncing the Christians to Rome, saying, "They are not part of us. They are not Jews at all," Christians faced persecution from Rome in part, because of the slander of the Jews.<sup>vi</sup> Jesus returns the favor here by saying, "No, you Jews are not true Jews. You are a *synagogue of Satan*." Paul wrote in Romans 2:28-29, "*For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart.*"

## Call to Action

### 1. Do Not Fear

**10** So what does Jesus tell the church in Smyrna to do? Each church is given a call to action. The most common command in the Bible is not "love one another," or "obey my commandments." It is what Jesus says here in verse 10, ***Do not fear***. We don't think of fear as some scandalous sin, but nothing keeps us from the heart of God more effectively than our fear. So, Jesus tells the First Church of Smyrna, ***Do not fear***.

Circumstances were indeed fearful for these early followers of Christ. Financial hardship, systemic injustice, government oppression, and religious persecution made life difficult. So, why shouldn't they be afraid?

Pretend you haven't read the rest of the verse. Pretend you don't know what's coming next. What would we expect Jesus to say? *"Do not fear, for I am about to make things better. I am about to bless you. I am about to set things right."*

However, Jesus doesn't say anything like that. What he does say sounds like anything but encouragement. ***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.*** Jesus says, "I know it's bad now, and it's about to get a whole lot worse."

Two things we need to keep in mind here. First, God doesn't always guide us out of trials, but grows us through them. If you are going through a hard time, pray this, "God if you can't guide me out of this, grow me through it." God uses trials to strengthen us. Spiritual growth comes through the testing of trials.

*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. – James 1:2-4.*

Our promise of protection is not that we will not face trials, but that we won't face anything beyond what we can bear with Christ's help. Jesus' strategy for dealing with trials in your life is not to make your problems smaller, but to make you bigger.

Fearful circumstances do not define our lives. Life is more than what meets the eye. God is working a plan beyond what you can see. He can even use what was intended for your harm to accomplish his good in your life. When Joseph confronts his brothers many years after they sold him into slavery, he tells them, *"you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good."*<sup>vii</sup>

That is the essence of Jesus' promise to the church in Smyrna. "What the devil means to torment you, I will use to test you. What your persecutors intend for evil, I will use to bring you the crown of life."

Another assurance is that their tribulation will be temporary. Jesus tells the church in Smyrna that their suffering will last *ten days*. We should not see this number literally, as though they could check off ten days on a calendar, nor does it represent 10 years. Remember, numbers in Revelation, in apocalyptic literature are almost always symbolic. Shane Wood, professor at Ozark Christian College, loves to say, “Weigh the numbers, don’t measure them.”

Think of ten in contrast to another number we find in Revelation— one thousand. One thousand portrays a loooong time. “*with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.*”<sup>viii</sup> One thousand portrays completeness as in Psalm 50:10, “*For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills.*” Does the Psalmist mean to say that if there is a cow on hill number one thousand and one, it doesn’t belong to God? No, one thousand hills is a symbolic way of saying, “all of them.”

In contrast, ten refers to short period of time. It’s a small number. The persecution will be bad for a limited period of time, but it will not last forever. It will pass. We will face trials in life, but they will never have the last word.

## 2. Be Faithful

That the trial is temporary doesn’t mean that it isn’t severe. The second thing Jesus tells them, and us to do in the face of tribulation, ***Be faithful unto death***. This means two basic things.

- A. Be faithful until you die
- B. Be faithful even if it means you die

Some in the church of Smyrna will die for their faith. In his book *The Insanity of God*, Nik Ripken tells the story of Katya, a Russian grandmother. She recounted a story from 1917 when she was 7 years old, and her grandfather, a Pastor, was arrested by the communist authorities who had just taken power. He was given one day’s notice. He set what affairs he could in order, and buried the family bible in a field behind their house so that the authorities would not take it.

The police arrived the next day and took him into custody. After several weeks, the family was granted permission to bring him clothes and food to last him through the harsh winter. Under the watchful eyes of guards, Katya and her family lined up to say goodbye to her grandfather

through the barbed wire fence. The last person at the fence was Katya's grandmother. As she touched him through the fence, he placed in her hands a piece of paper he had secreted away.

Later, in the privacy of their home, Katya's grandmother unfolded the piece of paper. It explained where her husband had buried the Bible, and asked her to dig it up and read what he'd written inside the cover. In his message he urged them to read and always remember Revelation 2:10

That would be the last time they would see him. He would be martyred two weeks later. He was both faithful until his death, and he was faithful even though it lead to his death.<sup>ix</sup>

This same call is given to all of us. We must be faithful until the day we die. If that means we die at the ripe old age of 92 of natural causes, may those be years of walking faithfully with our Lord. If that means we die as a young man or young woman because of Jesus, then then let us die true to our Savior.

### **The Promise**

Jesus' call to action always comes with a promise. If you do not fear and you are faithful unto death, Jesus promises to ***give you the crown of life***. Even in death, death is not the last word. For the follower of Jesus, even death is temporary.

There is a hidden richness to these words. There is a reason Jesus makes this promise to the believers in Smyrna. The crown was one of the primary symbols of Smyrna. It was to them like that bald eagle or Uncle Sam is to us. Smyrna was called "The Crown of Asia." Archaeologists there have found crowns on many coins and artifacts. There was a large hill on the edge of Smyrna topped with a ring several pagan temples. These were known as the "crown of Smyrna."<sup>x</sup> Smyrna was also known for its games in which a crown was awarded to the winners.

There were two types of crowns in the ancient world. First, was the royal crown which was worn by kings and rulers. Second, was the victor's crown which would have been awarded to the winners of Smyrna's games. It is the victor's crown our Lord and Savior promises here. It signifies the believer's eternal life in Christ. They are victorious over both sin and death. There is

no trial or tribulation that can take that victory away. Not even death can take that victory away.

**11** This victor's crown means that, although they may face physical death, Jesus promises they *will not be hurt by the second death*.

The assurance is that though they will have to face the first death, they will not have to face the second death. What is the second death? The first death is physical death. It's the death we all die. It's the death some of them will face from persecution. But the second death is spiritual death. It is the eternal judgment of hell. Revelation 21:8 tells us about the second death:

*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 sulfur, which is the second death.*

There is a physical death and a spiritual death. The first death may hurt us, but the second death never will.

The thought of dying is not a pleasant one. None of us relish pain. However, the reality for us as Christians is that ultimately we have nothing to fear from either the first death or the second death.

For these suffering believers in Smyrna their physical death is only an interruption or a temporary state. Death will not have the last word. Even if we must face the worst in this life, it is not the last chapter in the story.

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<sup>i</sup> Monitor Magazine. "The World of 100% Election Victories." BBC News. N.p., 11 Mar. 2014. Web. 14 Sept. 2016.

<sup>ii</sup> Mounce, Robert H. (1977) The Book of Revelation. Grand Rapids, MI; Eerdmans Publishing. p. 73.

<sup>iii</sup> 2 Cor. 4:17

<sup>iv</sup> Woodley, Matt. "Seven Questions for New Converts in an Asian Country." Preaching Today. N.p., 19 Sept. 2013. Web. 15 Sept. 2016.

<sup>v</sup> Graves, David E. (2006) Bible and Spade: Local References in the letter of Smyrna (Rv 2:8-11), Part 3: Jews in Smyrna. Ephrata, PA: Associates for Biblical Research. p. 41-47.

<sup>vi</sup> Beale, G.K. (1999) "The Book of Revelation." Grand Rapids, MI; Eerdmans Publishing. p. 240.

<sup>vii</sup> Genesis 50:20

<sup>viii</sup> 2 Peter 3:8

<sup>ix</sup> Ripken, Nik (2013) The Insanity of God. Nashville, TN: B&H publishing. pp. 168-169

<sup>x</sup> Stedman, Ray C. "Smyrna and Pergamum -- The Pressured Church." Ray Stedman. RayStedman.org, n.d. Web. 10 Nov. 2016.