

Letters to the Seven Churches: Smyrna

REVELATION 2:8-11

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****COVID-19 SPLIT SERVICE****

It is good to see you this morning! 2021 is off to a rather strange start after all, but God is still God, and we are still able to come together as his people, and for that, we are thankful. I hope you have the elements for the Lord's Supper with you. John will be leading us in the prayers for the Supper right after our study this morning. And then, Caleb Richter will be leading us in "Living By Faith" (#400).

We are starting, this morning, with a summary of God's plan for our salvation. He sent his only Son to die on the cross, he was buried, and he was raised up on the third day. And in response, once we believe that good news, we turn to God with a change of heart concerning sin, we confess our faith in Jesus as the Son of God, and then we allow ourselves to be buried with Christ in baptism. If you would like to learn more, please give us a call or send a message. The church number is 608-224-0274.

And once again, we are starting today with an example. As I've mentioned before, I first ran into Maurice Williams (on the left) when he spoke on fitness for preachers at Polishing the Pulpit several years ago. At the time, brother Williams owned his own fitness studio in Washington, DC. He has been an encouragement to me personally over the past few years, and every time I've seen him, I have thanked him for saving my life. He was quite motivational in my weight loss. I tell people that I see my trainer once a year, in August, at Polishing the Pulpit. He has now been hired by Freed-Hardeman University as an assistant professor of health and human performance, and he is about to start the new semester in just over a week. So, I'm now hoping to see him twice a year – at Polishing the Pulpit and the Freed-Hardeman Lectures! Not many people can say that they plan on seeing their personal trainer twice as much this year as they did last year. Of course, COVID is messing this up, but I have huge plans to double the visits to my trainer. I looked up his bio online, and he says that his life goals are to "serve God, live long, and die feeling young and healthy." That sounds like a personal trainer, doesn't it!

Anyway, Maurice just posted a few days ago that after a series of studies with a friend back in DC, his friend was baptized early last week. Maurice is on the left, and his friend, Shaquille Barzey, is pictured on the right. The picture of Shaquille is a screenshot from their most recent study together. Not long after this, Shaquille posted and said, "I feel like a new man!! Praise the Lord! Thank you, brother Maurice, for introducing me to the church that baptized me today. I pray God uses me for great purposes." That is our prayer as well. So, we rejoice with Maurice and Shaquille, and Shaquille's new Christian family out in Silver Springs, Maryland. And we are sharing

this by way of encouragement. What Shaquille has done this week, you can do this morning. I would also give the reminder that what Maurice has done this week, you can do today, and that is: Share the gospel with a friend online. If you have any questions, please get in touch.

This morning, we continue our series of lessons on Jesus' messages to the seven churches in the book of Revelation. We learned that the book of Revelation was written by the apostle John, from a Roman prison colony on the island of Patmos, most likely in the mid-90's AD. Back in December, then, we starting by introducing Jesus. In Revelation, Jesus is revealed for who he really is.

And then, last week, we moved into Revelation 2 by looking at the first message, written to the church in Ephesus. We learned that the church in Ephesus was really good at standing for the truth and weeding out false teachers, but they had left their first love, Jesus says, and so he calls them to repent and return and to do the things that they did at the beginning.

I. Today, we move to the next message, and this one is intended for the church in SMYRNA.

As you can see, in addition to the larger arrow pointing to Smyrna, I've now also added some smaller arrows, indicating the direction this letter would have traveled, and we will add more as we move through the remainder of these seven messages. Smyrna was first settled roughly 2000 years before Christ, at roughly the same time Abraham was called by God in Ur (in the opposite direction). And like Ephesus, and other coastal cities, it was a center of trade and culture, similar to our coastal cities here in the United States, cities like New York and Los Angeles.

We have some ruins from Smyrna, including the remains of what is basically a mile-long agora, or outdoor shopping mall, a public market. Today, we might think of the "Magnificent Mile" down in Chicago. It was well-known and was lined with temples to various Greek and Roman gods. Unlike some other cities in the ancient world, Smyrna was a planned city. It was well-designed. The name "Smyrna" is basically the word "myrrh," and myrrh, of course is a small tree that produces an aromatic gum that was often used in elaborate burials. It was brought by the wise men to Jesus at his birth, it was offered to Jesus on the cross, and it was also brought by Nicodemus to prepare the Lord's body for burial. Smyrna, then, was apparently a source of myrrh in the ancient world.

Homer was born in Smyrna – not the one from the Simpsons, but the Homer who wrote the Iliad in the mid-700's BC. By the time we get to 26 AD (at roughly the same time Jesus starts preaching), Smyrna wins a bid to build the first ever temple to the Roman emperor, Tiberius. Just as cities today make pitches to host the Olympics or other events (like the Crossfit Games here in Madison), Smyrna was quite the patriotic city and won the bid for building the temple to Tiberius, and they were consistently faithful in their worship of the Roman emperors and in their loyalty to Rome. The Roman philosopher Cicero once said that, "Smyrna is one of our most faithful and most ancient allies."

And, as you can see from the picture on the wall up here, Smyrna has continued as an inhabited city up through modern times, unlike Ephesus and the others. The city is almost exclusively Islamic now, and it is known as Izmir, the Arabic equivalent of Smyrna. It has a population of nearly 3 million, which is roughly the same size as Chicago. So, it is a large and important city in Turkey these days. We will see it on the news from time to time due to the earthquakes that are so common over there.

By the way, before we get to the text itself, I just want to give the reminder that we are using the same basic outline for all of these lessons. We're looking at the city itself and any background information we might have, we'll read the text, and then we'll look at how Jesus describes himself, we'll look at the positive part of the message, then the negative, followed by any commands that are given, and then ending with a conditional promise.

So, with this as background, let's look together at Revelation 2:8-11, the message from Jesus (through John) to the church in Smyrna – Revelation 2:8-11,

⁸ “And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this: ⁹ ‘I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰ Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.’

II. **As we get back to our outline, let's notice here at the beginning how JESUS DESCRIBES HIMSELF in this message.**

He is ***“the first and the last.”*** This is the first of two descriptions, both intended to build confidence in a church that's being persecuted. When we suffer, we appreciate hearing from somebody who's gone before us. We think of a trailblazer, a term going back to ancient times when somebody would go first and would strip the bark off trees here and there to mark the way. Today, many trails are marked with “blazes,” little marks of paint, and they lead the way. And in the same way, with reference to persecution, Jesus has gone first. Jesus has gone before us. Jesus has blazed the trail. Jesus has marked the path. But he is not only the first, he is also the last. He has come out on the other side. He also brings up the rear, making sure everybody makes it out safely. At Beaver Creek Bible Camp, I always assign somebody to lead our hikes, and that's a very important role. But even more important is the person who brings up the rear. If 60 kids take a wrong turn in the woods, that's okay. At least we're all together. But the most important role is the person at the end. Nobody is allowed to fall behind. That is perhaps what Jesus is suggesting here. He is the ***“first and the last.”*** There is an end to it, he has made it, and he will make sure we make it as well.

In 1 Peter 2:21, Peter refers to the suffering of Jesus and refers to him ***“...leaving you an example...to follow in His steps.”*** In suffering, Jesus leads the way. He is the ***“first and the last.”*** This description, by the way, goes back to Isaiah 44:6 and is a clear reference to deity, ***“Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: ‘I am the first and I am the last, and there is no God besides Me.’*** When Jesus says that he is the ***“first and the last,”*** he is rightfully claiming to be God, and he's describing himself in this way to encourage these people.

We also find that Jesus describes himself as the one, ***“...who was dead, and has come to life.”*** In the same way, especially in a time of persecution, Jesus has gone where we are going. And again, unlike the other “gods” that were worshiped in Smyrna, Jesus gave up his life but has also come out on the other side. He describes himself in this way because of what comes next.

III. As we move into verse 9, we have the COMPLIMENT.

And the compliment is, ***“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 knows three things here. First of all, he knows their ***“tribulation.”*** The word refers to intense, crushing, or suffocating “pressure.” It was a word used to refer to the crushing of grapes. And it came to refer to persecution. Sometimes we might be pressured to give up the Christian faith. The word is translated as ***“affliction”*** as Paul refers to the time he spent in this area over in 1 Corinthians 1:8-9. He says, ***“For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction [that is, PRESSURE or TRIBULATION] which came to us in Asia [the west coast province of Asia Minor], that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead.”*** Jesus knows about this.

In addition to knowing their ***“tribulation,”*** Jesus also knows their ***“poverty.”*** As I understand it, the word Jesus uses here refers to absolute destitution, the kind of poverty where we have nothing at all – it’s not just a matter of just barely covering our bills, but this is the kind of poverty where we have nothing. Very few of us have ever experienced this. And yet even in their poverty, notice how Jesus describes them as actually being ***“rich.”*** Physically, they have nothing, but spiritually, they are wealthy. He doesn’t deny their poverty, but he gives them a new perspective. As a church, they don’t have a nice place to meet, with heat and air-conditioning, they just barely have clothing and food to survive, but they have something greater than physical wealth. They have the gospel. I’m thinking of an incident from Matthew 11:4-5, where Jesus says, ***“Go and report to John what you hear and see: 5 the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM.”*** So, with Jesus, the blind get to see, the lame get to walk, the lepers are cured, the deaf hear, and the dead come back to life, so you would think that the poor should get all their money back. But that’s not what happens, is it? No, ***“the poor have the gospel preached to them.”*** That’s not parallel! But, the point is: The poor are given something much more valuable than physical wealth. They have the gospel. And as the one who gave up the riches of heaven to come to this earth to live in poverty himself, Jesus understands.

Scholars tell us that this physical poverty among the Christians in Smyrna might have been due (in part) to the work situation at that time. We think of the silversmiths down the road in Ephesus who got so upset that Paul’s preaching against Diana was cutting into their business. As in Philippi, they got together and harassed the early church. The guilds have been described as something of a mix between the local chamber of commerce, and the city clerk’s office, and a trade union. If you wanted to buy, or sell, or trade, or do work in a city, you had to participate. And to participate (to buy, or sell, trade, or even work), you had to agree that Caesar is Lord. Once a year, you had to offer a pinch of incense on the altar to Caesar, and that was a part of renewing your license for the year. In today’s language, I’m imagining a checkbox on a form in a state or city office – I want to be licensed to do work in the city, and down at the bottom of the form there’s a little box, “Caesar is Lord.” That’s the pressure the early Christians were under. Without checking that box, they couldn’t provide for their families. But checking the box was not something they could do, because only Jesus is Lord. So, they were extremely poor.

The other reason for their poverty comes in the third observation Jesus makes here, that he knows how they are being ***“slandered”*** or ***“blasphemed”*** by the Jews. They claim to be Jews, but they aren’t really: They are a synagogue of Satan. As I understand it, Judaism was a legal religion at this point. Everybody had to worship the Emperor, but the Jews were grandfathered in, we might say (as long as you pay your taxes and stay out of

trouble, we will let you do your thing). Not knowing any better, the Romans assumed that Christianity was a sect of the Jews. So, for many years, Christianity was allowed. However, as time went on, and as some of the Jews got more and more jealous of the Christian faith, they started turning people in. And since enforcement was somewhat complaint-based, they started slandering Christians to the Romans. By the way, many of our laws here in Madison are enforced based on complaints. If I have an unauthorized bonfire in my backyard, the city really doesn't get involved until my neighbor says something. We don't have "bonfire police" wandering the streets of Madison looking for unauthorized smoke. Well, that's how it worked in Smyrna. And so, the Jews would slander the Christians. They would go to their local authorities and say, "Hey, there's this family down the street, and they've never worshiped the emperor." Or, "My neighbor said something about the whole world being destroyed with fire someday. He's probably an arsonist. You should probably check that out. He sounds dangerous." Or, "I was in my neighbor's house the other day, and they don't have any idols. I think they might be atheists." Or, "I know of a group meeting every Sunday, and they don't recognize Caesar as Lord. In fact, they talk about another king, Jesus." Or, "I think we have some cannibals in the neighborhood. I heard them talking about eating some guy's flesh and drinking his blood." This is "cancel culture," as we might describe it today. And before long, the Romans start cracking down on Christianity. This, by the way, is how Jesus gets crucified – some of the leaders are spreading rumors about Jesus claiming to be another king, and tearing down the temple, and so on.

It's the kind of slander I've heard between husbands and wives, as the relationship turns sour and one tries to turn all of their mutual friends against the other, "You'll never believe what he said," and then there's some twist of something taken completely out of context for the purpose of destroying the other person. Jesus says, ***"I know the slander."*** I know the things that have been said against you. Jesus understands. And he also understands and knows the things that are said against us today – we are anti-choice, because we don't approve abortion; we are anti-woman, because we believe that men need to take a leading role in worship; we are anti-gay, because we believe marriage is between a man and a woman; we are anti-science, because we believe God created the heavens and the earth. And on and on. Jesus knows what it means to be slandered, and he understands.

IV. In our outline, we come to the CRITICISM, but in the text, we have NOTHING!

Smyrna is one of only two churches in Revelation where Jesus has no criticism whatsoever. I could have just skipped this point, but I did want to at least mention this. We might be tempted to ask: Why is this church with no criticism getting persecuted so much? One possibility is that they are getting persecuted because they are so faithful. After all, Paul did say to Timothy, ***"Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted"*** (2 Timothy 3:12). Godly living leads to persecution. And there might be another (slightly related) reason for it. In verse 10, Jesus refers to ***"testing."*** These people are in the process of being ***"tested."*** And so it's possible, then, that all of the fakers have already left this congregation! After all, if the Christian faith causes you to lose everything, and if you are not sincere, why bother? Those who have left their first love and tolerant of false teaching are long gone from this congregation! They have long since offered that incense to Caesar. And now, those who are left are the real deal at this congregation. I can't help but wonder whether we are being tested as a congregation right now, tested by the pandemic. Are we perhaps being sorted out right now? And once it is safe for everybody to come back together, who will be left? It seems that pressure and persecution either makes us give up or it makes us lean on God even more than we have in the past. And so, in a slightly similar way, perhaps persecution had been testing the church in Smyrna. Jesus, then, has nothing bad to say, no criticism here.

V. And that leads us to the COMMAND.

And we actually have two commands (in verse 10), ***“Do not fear,”*** and ***“Be faithful.”*** First of all, ***“Do not fear what you are about to suffer.”*** This is probably not the message they were hoping for! Instead of relief, Jesus says that it is about to get worse, ***“Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days.”*** Notice: It might appear to be Roman soldiers doing these things, but Jesus clearly indicates that the ***“devil”*** is behind it. This is the book of Revelation, after all. He’s pulling back the curtain here. Satan is doing these things, but he’s using the government to do it.

I would also remind us that back in the First Century, people were not sent to prison for long periods of time (like we have today). You weren’t given an opportunity to learn how to read or learn a trade or watch TV for years on end, but prison was pretty brief: 1.) Long enough force somebody to do something, 2.) Long enough to go to trial, or 3.) Only until the prisoner gets executed. And it seems like Jesus is suggesting Option #3 here. The devil will put them in prison, but only for ten days. By the way, Daniel and his friends were tested for ten days (in Daniel 1), as they refused to eat the king’s food – similar pressure. But the message here is: It’ll be bad, they will be tested, but there will be a limit to it. First of all, then, ***“Do not fear,”*** one of Jesus’ favorite commands, repeated dozens of times in the gospel accounts, ***“Do not be afraid.”***

But secondly, ***“Be faithful.”*** ***“Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”*** Jesus knows what this is like. He was faithful until death, wasn’t he? James gives some very similar encouragement in James 1:12 when he says, ***“Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.”*** So, ***“Do not fear,”*** and ***“Be faithful.”*** This doesn’t just mean: Stay faithful your whole life until you die of old age at some point, but it means: Stay faithful, even if it costs you your life.

A number of years later, a man believed to be a student of the apostle John is serving as an elder of the church in Smyrna. His name is Polycarp. When the Romans came to arrest him, he insisted on preparing a meal for them, which he did. When he was taken to the authorities, the proconsul really didn’t want to execute an old man, so he pretty much begged Polycarp to just admit that “Caesar is Lord.” How hard could it be? He refused. They brought him into the amphitheater, and when pressed in front of an angry mob of 20,000 people, he said this, “Eighty-six years I have served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” The proconsul threatens to burn him alive, and Polycarp says, “You threaten me with the fire that burns for a time, and is quickly put out, for you do not know the fire that awaits the wicked in the judgment to come and in everlasting punishment. Why are you waiting? Come, do what you will.” They did. One account tells us that the Jews even broke the Sabbath to help carry the firewood. And Polycarp was set on fire. We can hardly imagine doing something like that to an 86-year-old man. But I do imagine that when the time came, Polycarp almost certainly thought back to this message from Jesus sixty years earlier, ***“Do not fear,”*** and ***“Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”*** Polycarp died on Saturday, February 23, 155 AD. He died in faith, putting his trust in ***“...the first and the last,”*** the One ***“...who was dead, and has come to life.”***

VI. As we come to the end, we come to the CONDITIONAL PROMISE.

We might wish this message could have ended with some reassurance that everything would be okay, that life would get back to normal for these people. That’s what we’re hoping for today, aren’t we? We want things to return to normal. But that’s not the promise. The promise is, ***“He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.”*** The ***“second death”*** is mentioned again in Revelation 20 and 21. And in both places, as here, it refers to

eternal death, the death that comes after the first death (physical death). And it's the second death we really need to be concerned about. We will not be hurt by it, though, but only if we "**overcome**," only if we stay faithful. As I was preparing for today's lesson, I came across an interesting statement, "If you have Christ then all your pain is temporary; if you don't then all your pleasure is temporary." So true. And something slightly similar, "He who is born once will die twice; he who is born twice will die once." All of us will die once. Our goal is to avoid the "**second death**," and we do that by remaining faithful.

Conclusion:

Stay faithful. Even under pressure, even if it comes to poverty, even when we are falsely accused by the world, even if we are thrown in prison: Do not be afraid, and stay faithful, even to the point of death.

As we close, let's go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

You are the first and the last, the Living God, and we praise you this morning for revealing your Son in the book of Revelation. Thank you for the promise of eternal life. Thank you for making a way. As the world continues to do what the world has always done, we pray that we would not be afraid and that we would be faithful, no matter what happens to us.

We haven't seen some of our brothers and sisters for close to a year now. It's frustrating. We hate this. But we ask that we not get discouraged. We ask that you give us the courage and wisdom to always do what is right and to reach out in ways that will encourage.

We come to you in the name of your Son, Jesus. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com