

## FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH

### Revelation 2:8-11

Rev. Dr. Richard D. Phillips

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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 (Rev. 2:10).

**T**he Roman Proconsul urged his prisoner: “Swear, and I will release you; curse the Christ.” His prisoner was the aged bishop of the Asian city of Smyrna, named Polycarp. The year was 154 AD, almost 60 years after John had delivered the message from Jesus to the church in Smyrna, in Revelation 2:8-11. “Be faithful unto death,” Jesus had urged, “and I will give you the crown of life” (Rev. 2:10). Since Polycarp would have been 27 years old when Revelation’s message came to his church, it is quite likely that he was present when the letter was read in the congregation. Indeed, since tradition holds that Polycarp was consecrated as bishop of Smyrna by John himself, it is quite possible that Polycarp actually was the one who read aloud the book of Revelation when it arrived from the apostle to that church. There can be little doubt that Polycarp remembered Jesus’ exhortation and promise. He therefore answered the proconsul in memorable words: “Eighty and six years have I served [Christ], and he has done me no wrong; how then can I blaspheme my king who saved me?” With that refusal, Polycarp was executed by public burning, having been faithful to the end and being certain of the promised crown from his Lord.<sup>1</sup> His obedience to the command Jesus gave to the church in Smyrna reminds us that the book of Revelation was given to address the real needs of the

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<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, The Daily Study Bible (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1976, 2004), 85.

Christians facing adversity and trials in the apostle's day, just as it addresses the situation of afflicted believers today.

If Ephesus was the chief city of Roman Asia, the Smyrna was a shining jewel nestled on the Aegean coast. A city of over 200,000 residents, Smyrna possessed a fine harbor and a prominent hill known as "the Crown of Smyrna" that was surrounded by elegant estates. The city had been founded as a Greek colony around the year 1000 BC, but was destroyed in 600 BC by an invasion from Lydia. Over three hundred years later, Smyrna was rebuilt in a grand style according to the plans of Alexander the Great, adorned with temples to Zeus and Cybele. As early as 195 BC, Smyrna had thrown its lot in with the rising power in Rome, dedicating another temple to the goddess Roma. During the 300 years between that time and the writing of Revelation, Smyrna had been one of Rome's most loyal vassals, having been lauded by Cicero as "one of our most faithful and our most ancient allies." During one war in the east, the Smyrnians had stripped off their own clothes to provide for a suffering Roman army, and in the year 26 AD, Smyrna had competed for and won the honor of erecting a temple to the emperor Tiberius.<sup>2</sup> Given Smyrna's commitment to Rome and the cult of emperor worship, we would expect that the church here would become a particularly vulnerable target to the persecutions that the emperor Domitian was about to unleash on those who would not bow to his supposed deity.

## A PERSECUTED CHURCH

**S**myrna receives the shortest of Jesus' seven messages, yet one filled with praise and absent any criticism from the Lord. Jesus' urgent letter to this church is dominated by his need to prepare them for severe persecution that is drawing near: "I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander... Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison" (Rev. 2:9-10).

In the first letter, Jesus told the Ephesians, "I know your works" (Rev. 2:2). Jesus is equally familiar with the state of affairs in Smyrna, especially the "tribulation" that was upon them. This word means living under the pressure of great oppression. It is not surprising that Jesus first associated this tribulation with "poverty," since successful

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 82-4.

participation in social and economic life would probably have been impossible to those not willing to worship Caesar as Lord. G. K. Beale comments: “the imperial cult permeated virtually every aspect of city and often even village life in Asia Minor, so that individuals could aspire to economic prosperity and greater social standing only by participating to some degree in the Roman cult.” We can see why Jesus sends so favorable a letter to this church, since the particular word for “poverty” (Greek, *ptocheia*) indicates the crushing poverty of those who are not able to meet even their basic needs, simply because of their commitment to lead holy lives before the Lord.

How few Christians today are willing to place the affairs of Christ’s kingdom ahead of their careers or financial prosperity. But the Christians of Smyrna realized that theirs was the privilege of sharing in Christ’s own suffering. Paul used the same word for poverty when he wrote of Christ: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). How greatly the example of both Christ and the Christians of Smyrna condemns the false teaching of today’s so-called “prosperity gospel,” that says that believers who lack earthly health and riches are suffering because of their lack of faith. Douglas Kelly writes: “How dare anyone accuse [the Smyrnians] of lacking faith, when they are living in poverty out of self-sacrificial love to Jesus.”<sup>3</sup>

A second form of tribulation came through the “slander” the Christians were enduring “from those who say that they are Jews and are not” (Rev. 2:9). Another feature of Smyrna was the large and prominent Jewish community in the city. If the pattern of the apostle Paul had been followed when the gospel came to this city, the evangelists would first have preached the gospel to Jews and many of the first believers may have come from the Jewish community. This was one reason why Jewish leaders were some of the early church’s most resolute oppressors. Another reason was their resolve to retain the cherished privileges under Roman rule. Because of Jerusalem’s support of Julius Caesar in the Civil War, over a century earlier, Jews were granted special permission not to worship the emperor but to offer prayers to their own God on his behalf. Not wanting to share this status with converts to Christ, the Jews slandered Christians to the

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<sup>3</sup> Douglas F. Kelly, *Revelation*, Mentor Expository Commentary (Ross-shire, Scotland: 2012), 42.

authorities as those who did not worship the God of the Old Testament and blasphemously denied the Christian claim that Jesus is the Messiah. Among slanders known to have been launched at Christians were the claim that Christians drowned their children and ate human flesh (these claims arising from false ideas of baptism and the Lord's Supper), that Christians were politically disloyal, and that Christians were fire-raisers, since they predicted the end of the world in flames.<sup>4</sup> Jesus states that Jews who slander the true Messiah and his people "are not" true Jews. This agrees with Paul's teaching in Romans 2:28-29 that true Jews are defined not by ethnicity but by faith in the message of Christ. Dennis Johnson comments that "the people of God are defined Christocentrically, not genealogically."<sup>5</sup>

The third and fourth form of persecution in Smyrna go together, since imprisonment in those days was not for the sake of incarceration but merely as a brief prelude to execution: "Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison... Be faithful unto death" (Rev. 2:10).

The kinds of tribulation suffered by the church at Smyrna are still being suffered by Christians around the world today. For instance, under the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe, Christians were often barred from attending the universities that alone offered access to well-paying jobs and important positions in society. Despite high qualifications, many faithful believers held only low paying jobs and were subjected to frequent harassment and arrest of trumped up charges.<sup>6</sup> In America today, Christians are frequently slandered as being hateful people because of our moral stance against homosexuality. Simply reading the Bible's teachings on sexuality and marriage may soon be criminalized in the United States as "hate speech." In places like central Nigeria, Sudan, and Pakistan, Christians are subjected to sudden violence and death from Muslim terrorists and in places like China, Iran, and Indonesia, Christians may be jailed for long periods simply for their testimony to Jesus. With the collapse of Christian tolerance in the West, there soon will be few places where believers will not pay a price for our faith in the form of tribulation, just as Paul foretold: "all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12).

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<sup>4</sup> Cited from Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, 90.

<sup>5</sup> Dennis Johnson, *Revelation*, 74.

<sup>6</sup> Kelly, *Revelation*, 43.

In pointing out that the suffering of believers in Smyrna would largely come through Jewish accusation, Jesus declares that such people not only “say that they are Jews and are not,” but that they are actually “a synagogue of Satan” (Rev. 2:9). We are reminded of the denunciations Jesus pronounced on the Pharisees during his earthly ministry, when those Jewish leaders accused him of falsehood despite compelling proof of his claims to be the Messiah. Jesus said: “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him” (Jn. 8:44). While the slandering Jews claimed to be the synagogue of God they were actually serving the cause of Satan, especially as their denunciations of Christians to the Roman authorities led to the arrest and execution of Christ’s people. History records that it was his Jewish enemies who denounced Polycarp to the Romans, and that Jews went so far as to violate the Sabbath in order to gather the wood used in Polycarp’s execution. No wonder Christ associates them with the name of Satan, since that name refers to the Devil as the false accuser” of God’s faithful people.<sup>7</sup>

Jesus goes on to say that it is “the devil” who “is about to throw some of you into prison” (Rev. 2:10), reminding believers that we face a perennial enemy of ceaseless malice and great power. G. B. Caird writes: “Throughout this book John is constantly trying to show how Satan’s hand may be detected in the affairs of this world; but he is equally insistent that Satan can do nothing except by the permission of God, who uses Satan’s grimmest machinations to further his own bright designs.”<sup>8</sup>

## LORD OF THE PERSECUTED

**J**esus has a message of encouragement to the persecuted church of Smyrna, which is grounded in his own glorious person. His command is, “Do not fear what you are about to suffer” (Rev. 2:10). The basis for this urging is found in Christ’s opening words: “to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life’” (Rev. 2:8). Jesus presents himself as

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<sup>7</sup> Robert H. Mounce, *Revelation (Revised)*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), ?.

<sup>8</sup> G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (San Francisco: Harper, 1966), 36.

the Lord of the persecuted, providing hope, provision, and victory for his saints in the tribulation of this world.

The first reason the Christians of Smyrna should not fear the fearful tribulation before them is that Jesus is “the first and the last” (Rev. 2:8). Some commentators suggest that this statement is meant to contrast with the reputation of Smyrna as the first city of Asia. In the city’s society, men and women were busy striving to be better than everyone else so as to take the first place. Barclay notes, however: “Beside the glory of Christ, all human titles are of no importance and all human claims become ridiculous.”<sup>9</sup> In the several uses of this expression already in Revelation, we have previously noted that “first and last” signifies God’s sovereignty over all things, so Christ’s meaning is also that his people should not fear in light of his sovereign control of all that they face.

A second reason why the believers should fear is that Christ is the Lord and giver of life, by virtue of his resurrection conquest of the grave: Jesus reminds us that he “died and came to life” (Rev. 2:8). There is probably an intended irony here, since the city of Smyrna boasted a kind of resurrection, since after its earlier destruction the Macedonian rulers rebuilt the city in greater splendor. Jesus insists that this is little alongside his death and resurrection to free his people from sin and grant to them eternal life. Having died on a cross, Jesus had already experienced the very worst that the world can do to its enemies, and Jesus had prevailed in the resurrection for the salvation of his people. Therefore, Christians should not fear to die for Jesus, since in Christ the grave is the gateway into eternal glory in heaven. Douglas Kelly summarizes Jesus’ meaning as saying: “I have passed through the territory of death already. I have taken all of its terror away for believers. Now, the only thing that awaits you on the other side of death is holding my hand as we walk together into the new beauties of resurrection joy.”<sup>10</sup> Paul understood his own trials this way, writing that “this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Cor. 4:17).

Third, in light of what Jesus has said about himself, he is the Lord of the very trials being suffered by his faithful people. We see this in his declaration of the length of the trials to come: “I know,” Jesus said,

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<sup>9</sup> Barclay, 91.

<sup>10</sup> Kelly, *Revelation*, 41.

that “for ten days you will have tribulation” (Rev. 2:9-10). It is likely that “ten days” is a symbolic number indicating a limited and relatively brief period of suffering. The fact that Jesus was able to declare this duration in advance indicates that his sovereign control determines the bounds of the trial and limits its intensity. Michael Wilcock remarks: ““there would in the goodness of God come an eleventh day, and all would be over.””<sup>11</sup>

The duration of “ten days” is also probably intended to link back to the book of Daniel, in which the young believer and his friends were tested for ten days in Babylon, while they refused to transgress the law of Israel by eating forbidden foods from King Nebuchadnezzar’s table. This being the case, Jesus would be reminded the Smyrnians that Daniel and his friends came out of the trial “better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king’s food” (Dan. 1:15). Trusting in the same Lord, the Christians in Smyrna would emerge from tribulation strengthened in faith and they would have given public testimony to the power of their Savior and Lord.

Being reminded of Daniel, we also remember Christ’s faithfulness to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, when like the Smyrnian Christians they refused to bow before the golden image of the king. For this, Daniel’s friends were cast into a furnace to be burned alive. However, when they were thrust into the flames they not only were not consumed but onlookers saw “four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire,” with the additional figure appearing “like a son of the gods” (Dan. 3:25). We can only imagine that Polycarp, facing the flames because of his fidelity to Christ in his refusal to worship Caesar, must have thought back not only to the message of Revelation but also to the Christ’s faithfulness in delivering the heroes of Daniel from the flames. Polycarp was not spared physically, but there can be no doubt that Christ was with him to grant victory through the flames. This was to fulfill Isaiah 43:2-3’s promise of aid in tribulation: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.”

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Revelation*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1975), 46.

When Jesus declares his lordship over the trial about to be suffered in Smyrna, he not only promises a limited duration and the help of his presence in the flames, but Christ also declares his purpose in the tribulation. There is positive significance to the trial: Jesus permits it so “that you may be tested” (Rev. 2:10). There are two ways in which we should think of our faith being tested in trials. The first is the proving or displaying of the genuineness of our faith. Peter wrote that we should rejoice in our trials, since they “have come so that your faith--of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire--may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Pet. 1:6-7, NIV). When Christians hold fast in faith under trial, the genuineness of our belief and the certainty of our salvation is proven. True believers will pass the test of tribulation by holding fast to Jesus, while false believers who were never truly saved are revealed by falling away under trial.

Joined to this is a second purpose of strengthening or refining our faith. Paul said that we “rejoicing in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope” (Rom. 5:3-4). We have seen that Peter compared the trial of faith to the refining of precious metals. The aim of refining is to purify the precious metal by removing the dross. Likewise, Christ uses trials to drive out worldliness and sin from our lives and thus purify our faith. A smith refines ore by heating it to a very high temperature, plunging it into cold water, and then scraping away the dross. He continues this process until he can look upon the gold and see a clear reflection of his own face. So it is with Christ in refining our faith: his goal is through fire and water to separate and scrape away the dross of sin and unbelief, so that he may look upon our faith and see the clear reflection of his own glorious face.

Not only does Christ use tribulation to see his reflection in our lives, but he also employs trials so that we may learn to see him more clearly. Donald Grey Barnhouse writes: “How wonderful that when we are blinded by tears, we can nevertheless see our God. In fact, our tears become crystal lenses through which He is magnified; and in the midst of suffering we realize the greatness of His power and the tenderness of His love.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Donald Grey Barnhouse: *Expositions of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, DATE), 4:89.



## PERSECUTED BUT FAITHFUL

Jesus places a single requirement upon his persecuted church: “Be faithful,” even “unto death” (Rev. 2:10). They were not to look at the suffering to come, so that they trembled with fear, but through the suffering to the sovereign Lord who promised to deliver them strengthened and purified after a limited duration of trial. With this perspective, remaining faithful was their single goal.

Charles Hodge worked out faithfulness in suffering in two ways. First, the afflicted believers must hold fast to what God had entrusted to them, that is, their faith in Christ and the gospel. “The thing therefore committed to the Church... is... the truth of God as revealed in his holy word.”<sup>13</sup> They must also be faithful by maintaining their allegiance to Jesus. This was Polycarp’s commitment: “how then can I blaspheme my king who saved me?” The Christians of Smyrna must not yield to the Satanic demand that they worship Caesar, just as Christians today must be faithful not to bow to the gods of our age.

There are three incentives or this faithfulness in our passage, the first of which deals with a true assessment of the believers’ situation even in the midst of the trial. As the world saw them, the Christians were utterly impoverished, but Jesus declares instead: “but you are rich” (Rev. 2:9). The point was that they possessed spiritual riches that abundantly compensated for their material poverty. Anyone today who travels among persecuted believers will see this firsthand. In my own travels in East Africa, it is impossible to spend time with the materially poor and often oppressed Christians without experiencing envy for the simplicity, vibrant joy, and sheer spiritual wealth of their spiritual lives.

The present wealth of the Smyrnians’ faith compared very poorly, however, to what awaited them through their tribulation. Jesus promised: “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Rev. 2:10). Smyrna had its elegant city-center, its “crown,” with elegant estates surrounding a lofty height overlooking the sea. But the suffering Christians anticipated a more glorious crown upon the completion of their trial, and especially awaiting those who suffered death for their faith in Jesus. This promise connects to the athletic games held in Smyrna, which rivaled those of Mount

<sup>13</sup> Charles Hodge, *Princeton Sermons* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1879, reprint 2011), 321.

Olympus in Greece. Jesus was thus promising an ornament of glory, life, and power to crown those who triumphed through faithfulness unto death and thus achieved their entrance into eternal bliss. Romans were also given laurel crowns to wear at special banquets; Christians who are faithful to Christ through the tribulations of this world will wear the crown of eternal life in the eternal banquet of heaven.<sup>14</sup>

Jesus gave a third incentive to faithfulness under tribulation that pertains to believers of all times: “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” (Rev. 2:11). The expression “second death” appears later in Revelation, which identifies it with the eternal condemnation in hell that awaits unbelievers in the final judgment (Rev. 21:8). Simon Kistemaker explains: “The saints may suffer physical death at the hand of persecutors, but they will never be separated from God. By contrast, unbelievers will be cast into the lake of fire (20:14) and suffer eternal death.”<sup>15</sup>

The Bible not only speaks of two deaths, temporal and eternal, but also of two resurrections – of the spirit and of the body. All persons will be resurrected in the body on the last day to stand before the judgment throne of Christ (Mt. 25:31-32). But those who believe in Jesus in this present life, suffering tribulation for his name but made rich through saving faith, have received a spiritual resurrection in the new birth. Though often poor in the things of the world, afflicted believers are rich in the kingdom of God, and having been made alive to God through faith, they have no fear of the second death that is hell, having already with Jesus “passed from death to life” (Jn. 5:24).

It was knowing his deliverance from the second death that emboldened Polycarp of Smyrna to give so bold a testimony in the face of the death of his body in the flames. When the bishop refused to betray Jesus in worshipping Caesar, the proconsul threatened him with the terror of flames. Polycarp replied: “You threaten me with the fire that burns for a time, and is quickly quenched, for you do not know the first which awaits the wicked in the judgment to come and in everlasting punishment.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See a detailed explanation in Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), ??.

<sup>15</sup> SK, 125.

<sup>16</sup> Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, 85.

If you are like the proconsul in your unbelief, scorn, and perhaps even persecution of the people of Christ, Jesus has a word for you. He told his followers in Smyrna, “Do not fear what you are about to suffer” (Rev. 2:10). Likewise, Jesus tells unbelievers that their true fear is not what they will lose in this world through faith in Christ but rather the God’s judgment that awaits us all in death. Jesus once said: “do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Mt. 20:18). For both the Christian and the unbeliever, the Bible’s antidote to fear is one and the same, along with an invitation to eternal life: “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). He promises all who believe: “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life... The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death” (Rev. 2:10-11).