

In a.d. 177 Photinus, bishop of Lyons, was martyred along with many Christians of his city. The Christians were accused of incest, probably a result of their referring to one another as "brother" and "sister," and cannibalism, probably resulting from misunderstandings of what happened during the Lord's Supper. Christians were arrested, tortured, and then brought into the arena to serve as public entertainment. Two by two they were brought out for the gawking, bloodthirsty crowd. They were tortured and then thrown to the beasts.

Eusebius describes the suffering of one young female slave named Blandina:

*... her human mistress, who was herself one of the contenders among the martyrs, was in distress lest she should not be able, through the weakness of her body, to be bold enough even to make confession. Blandina was filled with such power that she was released and rescued from those who took turns in torturing her in every way from morning until evening, and they themselves confessed that they were beaten, for they had nothing left to do to her, and they marveled that she still remained alive, seeing that her whole body was broken and opened, and they testified that any one of these tortures was sufficient to destroy life, even when they had not been magnified and multiplied. But the blessed woman, like a noble athlete, kept gaining in vigour in her confession, and found comfort and rest and freedom from pain from what was done to her by saying, "I am a Christian woman and nothing wicked happens among us."*

When Blandina finally perished, Eusebius describes her as:

*... glad at her departure as though invited to a marriage feast rather than cast to the beasts.... and the heathen themselves confessed that never before among them had a woman suffered so much and so long.*

*Why do people persist when surrendering would save their lives?  
What keeps people, like this weak young woman Blandina, faithful  
unto death? How do they remain faithful unto death?*

We need to understand what it is... that keeps people faithful unto death... so that we can live and die well - ourselves. ... (PLEASE LISTEN TO ME... This is very sobering... and very true...) ... If we have not prepared ourselves to be ready to die for Christ's Name (if it ever becomes necessary)... then we are not true followers of Christ. We are simply playing a church game. ... Are you all-in... or is your faith tentative?

In order to be faithful unto death... the knowledge of Jesus must be bigger to us than the reality of death itself. ... We will read today... in the letter to the church at Smyrna... Jesus is the First and the Last... the Conqueror over death... the Giver of the crown of life to those who are faithful unto death. ... We will explore what all of that means... but it all really boils down to this - Jesus must be bigger to us than death itself.

Only those who are gripped by something worth more to them than their own life can be truly courageous. ... And courage is precisely what Jesus calls the church to... in our passage of study today. Courage is something that is desperately needed in the church today. We need to evaluate whether or not we agree with this unpopular truth – that Jesus is better than life.

In our study through the Book of Revelation... we came to the section which Christ told John to write... about the things “which are...” And we have seen that this means “the church age.”

John was given a three-fold outline of the book of Revelation that he was told to write... Revelation 1:19 says... “*write therefore the things that you have seen*” (the image of Christ standing before him)... “*the things that are*” (the church age that John was living in)... “*and those that are to take place...*” (the events that will occur after the church age... the events of the tribulation... whose description begins in chapter 4 onward... after these seven letters ... representing the church age.)

The church age in it’s entirety is represented by seven letters to seven churches. This is the first series of 7 that we come to in Revelation. The number seven represents completeness... and these seven churches represent the complete history of the church from Pentecost... until the church’s end... when we are raptured off this earth.

As we go through these letters... we will see a dual fulfillment – that John was addressing specific situations in each church... current to the day he penned them... but also how clearly they relate to definite periods of church history... all the way to the final period (Laodicea.)

Last week we studied the letter to the church at Ephesus. This church during John’s day AND the church period from Pentecost to around 100 A.D. parallel each other tremendously. Both had patiently endured hardship... defended God’s truth against false teachers... worked sacrificially... but eventually only did ministry out of a sense of duty. They had lost their first love for Jesus.

This morning we will be looking at the letter to the church at Smyrna... which amazingly parallels the period of church history from 100 A.D. to 312 A.D. ...

## Revelation 2:8-11

This letter to the church in Smyrna is all about Jesus. It may seem like the letter is about the suffering and persecution that the church in Smyrna is about to undergo, but from what Jesus says about that, it becomes clear that the suffering and persecution are just a stage built for the enactment of the drama that displays the worth of Christ.

Prophetically... Smyrna sets forth that age or stage in Church history when the Church was persecuted beneath the iron heel of pagan Rome. The persecution had begun in John's day... therefore the letter also concerned itself with what happened in Smyrna at the time of John's writing.

But from 100 to 312... Hundreds were brought into the amphitheaters of Rome to be fed to hungry lions and tigers while thousands cheered their deaths.

Many were crucified on crosses.

Others were covered with animal skins and tortured to death and eaten by wild dogs.

Some were covered with tar or wax and set on fire to serve as torches. Nero did this to illuminate his parties or nighttime chariot races.

Christians were also boiled in oil or burned at the stake such as the pastor of Smyrna, Polycarp. In 156 A.D. Polycarp refused to acknowledge Caesar as his Lord and renounce Jesus Christ and was threatened to be burned alive. His response was, *"Eighty-six years have I served Christ, and He has never done me wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me."*

Even though it was the Sabbath day, the Jews gathered sticks for the fire to roast Polycarp. Polycarp told them as they prepared the fires, *"It is well. I fear not the fire that burns for a season and after a while is quenched. Why do you delay? Come, do your will."* Polycarp's final prayer was gratefulness to the Lord to die for Him. His final words were *"I am a Christian."*

What a testimony he had for Christ! In this era, historians estimate that five million Christians were martyred for Christ. No other period of Church History has seen such suffering.

The Faithfulness of Polycarp to the end seems to have characterized this church in Smyrna in its entire testimony and resulted in this church's continuous faithful witness for God after many others of the early churches had long lost their life... The purifying fires of affliction caused the lamp of testimony to burn all the more brilliantly. The length of their trial, described here as being ten days, whether interpreted literally or not, is short in comparison with the eternal blessings which would be theirs when their days of trial were over. They could be comforted by the fact that the sufferings of this present time do not continue forever, and the blessings that are ours in Christ through His salvation and precious promises will go on through eternity.

J. H. Jowett well said, Ministry that costs nothing, accomplishes nothing. Be prepared to pay the price. ... Anyone who truly serves Christ... must be ready to pay the price.

For the most part... even the names of these seven churches have a role in their prophecy. ... The Greek word for Smyrna means "suffering" and it

comes from the word myrrh. Myrrh was a fragrant aromatic sap taken from a shrubby tree and it had a bitter taste. This gum could be extracted by cutting an incision into the bark of its trunk and branches. The oily sap would then ooze out of the tree, drop onto wooden squares or stones and solidify. The process involved the disfigurement of the tree. Myrrh was a perfect symbol then of suffering and the blessing that can come from suffering.

In order for this spice to give out its full fragrance and perfume, it had to be crushed and beaten. This is exactly what was done to the church at Smyrna. It was crushed, beaten, and persecuted. It was in the midst of bitter sorrow and suffering and was the most afflicted and persecuted of all the churches. In its suffering, it gave off the fragrance of Christ.

### **Revelation 2:8**

Jesus identifies himself as "*the first and the last, who died and came to life*". ... Think as far back as your mind can go... and Jesus was there before all that. ... He is "the first," before all else that is. Jesus is bigger than our ability to understand.

He is also "the last." Nothing will endure longer than Jesus. He is before and after everything. By identifying himself in this way, as "the first and the last," Jesus is explicitly claiming divinity. He cannot be preempted.

Jesus goes on to say that He is the One "*who died and came to life*." ... Who would have imagined that God could... or would, die? ... He is before and after all that is... and yet He entered into the progress of history... was

killed... and rose from the dead. There are no categories for these kinds of claims in the religions and philosophies of the world.

The death and resurrection of Jesus mean that death has no power over him. He is bigger than death itself... and given what the church in Smyrna faces... that reality is one they must keep in their minds if they are to be faithful.

This letter to the church in Smyrna is all about Jesus. It may seem like the letter is about the suffering and persecution that the church in Smyrna is about to undergo... but it becomes clear that in order to be faithful unto death... the knowledge of Jesus must be bigger to us than the reality of death itself. Jesus is the First and the Last, the Conqueror over death. ... Jesus must be bigger to us than death itself.

When you think about the end of your life... do you apply to your contemplation the fact that Jesus has conquered death? ... When you think about dangerous situations you might face—the noise in the night that means an intruder might be in your home... the thought that someone you love could fall into a rushing river... or be in some other situation that... if you try to help... might end your own life—when you think of life-threatening danger... do you apply to your thinking the triumph of Jesus over death? ... Applying to our fears the knowledge that Jesus is bigger than death will make us courageous.

Courage is a great thing... but we must keep in mind that courage is not our ultimate goal. ... Being seen as courageous has others look at us... it has them admire us. ... This all falls short unless our confidence shines a

bright spotlight on Jesus – as the reason for our confidence. ... Our ultimate goal is to live in ways that show our confidence is in Jesus.

After Jesus announces himself in verse 8... He says in verse 9... that He knows three things: 1) their "tribulation," 2) their "poverty," and 3) the "slander" made against them.

### **Revelation 2:9**

Sometimes we wonder if God knows about our troubles. How encouraging that He says... "*I know your tribulation...*" One of the most discouraging effects of suffering is that we feel alone. When Jesus tells the church in Smyrna that he knows their tribulation... He is reminding them of His presence with them.

The second thing Jesus knows is their "poverty." The church was poor.

There are two Greek words for poverty. One is the word *penia* which describes the poverty of the man who has to work for a living. That would describe most of us. The word for poverty here is **ptocheia** which means "destitution." The implication is the person has nothing at all. These folks were so poor that even the poor folks thought they were poor. Because of their stand for Christ, they lost their jobs, businesses, and social status and were considered outlaws. Many of these folks had their homes plundered by vandals, thieves, or Romans and no one lifted a finger to help them because of the stigma that was placed upon them. People felt they deserved this treatment. People hated the Christians in Smyrna for several reasons.



1. Christians were considered disloyal to Rome because they would not worship Caesar.
2. Christians were considered atheists because they would not worship the Greek and Roman gods.
3. Christians were accused of being cannibals because of misunderstandings about the Lord's Supper.
4. They were accused of being immoral because of the greeting of a holy kiss.
5. Christians were accused of being home-breakers because of the division that was caused when one spouse was saved and the other was still lost in sin.

The third thing that Jesus tells the church in Smyrna that he knows is "*the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan*". ... The Romans had granted the Jews an exemption from required participation in the Roman Imperial Cult. In other words, the Jews did not have to take part in Roman idolatry. Everyone else was required to participate.

Emperor worship was started to unite the Roman Empire and as a demonstration of gratitude to Rome for the peace and civility it brought to the world... but toward the end of the first century under the Emperor Domitian... it went from voluntary worship to mandatory worship.

Once a year a Roman citizen had to burn a pinch of incense on the altar of Caesar. All they had to do was say, "*Caesar was Lord*" and then they could depart to worship any god they wished to worship. They were given a certificate proving they did this. Refusal to do this was an indication to the

Romans that the person was disloyal to Rome and an outlaw or rebel. Without a certificate... and seen as disloyal... meant that you could not be a member of a guild. If you wanted to work... and earn an income... and if you wanted to purchas anything... including food... you had to be a member of a guild. So Christians quickly became poor – abject poor.

But they were rich! They may not have had many **coins** but they had **crowns**. They lived for eternal values that would never change, riches that could never be taken away. In fact, their suffering for Christ only increased their riches.

The Jewish slander (mentioned in verse 9)... probably has to do with Jews denouncing Christians to the Romans. ... As long as Christianity was under the Jewish umbrella... Christians were also exempt from required participation in the growing Roman Imperial Cult. ... If the Jews began denouncing Christians to the Romans—arguing that they were not Jews at all—Christians who refused to participate in Roman idolatry could not work... or buy anything.

Jesus denies the status of "Jew" to those who do not serve the Jewish King - Jesus himself. ... The claim to be Jewish is seen as a claim to be the people of God. These people who were persecuting Christians were claiming to be the people of God and children of Abraham. ... The New Testament perspective since the coming of Christ is altogether different. The true people of God are those who have recognized the Messiah and worship Him, that is, the Christians. ... They are the true 'children of Abraham'.

This very radical distinction is now applied here to the Jewish persecutors. They claim to be God's people but are not. They are those who gather in synagogues to celebrate Satan's kingdom - not God's. He identifies their true allegiance.

Jesus has announced himself as "the first and the last, who died and came to life" ... and he has assured them that he knows what they suffer and knows who their enemies are. ... Because of Who He is, and because He will be with them through the suffering... they can be free from fear.

### **Revelation 2:10**

He tells them not to fear what they are about to suffer. The only thing that will keep the Smyrnan Christians from fearing what they are about to suffer is their seeing that Jesus is bigger to them than death itself.

There is none of this namby-pamby nonsense suggesting that maybe if the Christians were less dogmatic... less narrow-minded... or maybe if they were more open to the possibility of there being more than one right way... they would not be suffering. (We will see this next week in the letter to the church at Pergamum. That period of church history is when the church married the world. Church and state team together... and the church compromises.)

Notice that there is a purpose statement given in verse 10... right after He recognizes who the enemy is (Satan) - "that you may be tested..." "*The devil is about to throw some of you in prison – that you may be tested...*"

God is using Satan to accomplish His purposes. God is using the devil's persecution to test and prove His people. And when His people come through the test, they make God look good, for only God could preserve them.

But God has set the boundary. There is a limit placed on how long their suffering would last – “ten days.”

This specific mention of time has caused much debate as Christians have tried to determine what it means. It could simply mean a literal period of ten days. However, in chapter 1 we saw that some of the description of Jesus was framed with words from the prophet Daniel. Here too it is likely that the book of Daniel forms the background to what Jesus is saying through John. In Daniel 1... Daniel and his friends are making a stand against the pagan rulers, seeking to serve King Nebuchadnezzar, and yet not compromising with his pagan world and its standards. They refuse to eat the meat served. They then set *ten days* as the time for a 'test' to see if they would survive well without eating meat. In many ways Daniel and his friends serve as an example of all believers who withstood the pressures of pagan life and stood for the Lord in spite of the threat of death. They have been tested and withstood the test. The persecution of these Christians from Smyrna can therefore be seen as part of God's 'test', and yet the period of testing is limited. It is not necessarily ten periods of twenty-four hours, but it will certainly come to an end, just as it did for Daniel and his friends, because Christ is in sovereign control.

Many students of God's Word (myself included)... believe these "ten days" refer to the ten separate attempts to wipe out Christianity prompted by the

edicts of ten different Roman rulers. It is amazing (once again) that this number corresponds so perfectly with actual church history... The first two Emperors ruled at the time of the contemporary church at Smyrna... to which John originally wrote. The others spread out through the second church period... ending in 312... when the third period of church history began... and the primary persecuting of the church ended.

Here is how it is laid out...

1. Nero (64-68 A.D.)—The Christians were blamed for the burning of Rome which was not at all true. He crucified Christians and fed them to wild beasts. He also had Paul executed and possibly Peter.
2. Domitian (90-96 A.D.)—Thousands of Christians were killed by him in Rome. He was responsible for banishing John to the Island of Patmos.
3. Trajan (104-117 A.D.)—Christianity was outlawed by his edicts. He was responsible for burning Ignatius at the stake.
4. Marcus Aurelius (161-180 A.D.)—Christians were tortured and beheaded by this man.
5. Severus (200-211 A.D.)—He crucified, burned, and beheaded believers.
6. Maximinius (235-237 A.D.)—Christians were put to death by him.
7. Decius (250-253 A.D.)—He executed every Christian he could find and endeavored to obliterate Christianity.
8. Valerian (257-260 A.D.)—His goal was to wipe out Christianity. He put the Bishop of Carthage to death.
9. Aurelian (270-275 A.D.)—He persecuted believers any way he could.

10. Diocletian (303-312 A.D.)—He was responsible for the most severe persecution and the attempt to burn all the existing Scriptures.

The reward that Jesus promises is particularly suitable for those who may die for their faith: ***I will give you the crown*** (or wreath) ***of life***. The town of Smyrna was famous for its athletic games, and thus a reward of the 'crown of life' would have reminded these Christians of the 'wreath' prize given only to the best athletes and citizens. In life in Smyrna these Christians were considered the lowest of the low, but the Lord of life will reward them with **life** itself, as we see in the promise which follows.

The Lord has special crowns for those who suffer. I know many wonderful saints who are going to get that crown some day. ... If you are suffering at this moment and you have wondered if He cares... He has something good for you in eternity. You will get something that no one else will be getting, except others in your condition. God's Word says...

**James 1:12 (ESV)**

*Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.*

That crown of life means that you are really going to live it up someday. What a glorious prospect that is for invalids and those on beds of pain today.

**Revelation 2:11**

Persecution cannot take away our eternal salvation protection blessings. Dwight L. Moody put it like this: "He who is born once will die twice; he who is born twice will die once."

Suffering has a way of reminding us which things in life really matter... forcing us to depend radically on God... and thus purifying our obedience to God's will.

If we have not prepared ourselves to die for Christ's name if necessary... we have not completed our responsibility of being Jesus followers. Like Daniel and his friends... we need to prepare for more strenuous future tests. You say... "How do we do that?" ... We do it by passing the ones we are given in the present. ... When we remain faithful in the face of rejection and our current (light) persecution... we develop a confidence in Jesus... and in order to be faithful unto death... the knowledge of Jesus must be bigger to us than the reality of death itself. Jesus is the First and the Last... the Conqueror over death... the Giver of the crown of life to those who are faithful unto death. ... Jesus must be bigger to us than death itself. ... The reward that He promises to give us is far greater... than the power and status that any of our oppressors now enjoy. We really have NOTHING to fear... but a lot to joyfully anticipate. The only exhortation Christ gave to the church at Smyrna was: "*Do not fear what you are about to suffer...*"

I am going to close by quoting Bill Hybels. Hybels writes...

*History is filled with men and women who said no to destructive fear and changed the world. But imagine if they had given in to the paralyzing effects of fear on their lives. Imagine the apostle Paul, fearing resistance or rejection, choosing to stay home rather than embarking on the missionary journeys that took the message of Christ throughout the known world.*

*Imagine Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. giving speeches filled with gentle hints about the evils of segregation, because he feared pushing too hard. Instead, King championed the civil rights movement against racial segregation in the United States.*

*Imagine Rosa Parks, during that same era in American history submitting to the bus driver's command to give up her seat to a white person. Imagine Nelson Mandela looking the other way when he witnessed and experienced apartheid in South Africa, because he didn't want to make a fuss. Instead, he spent twenty-seven years imprisoned and brought apartheid onto the world's radar, helping end the centuries-old regime of oppression.*

*Imagine Malala Yousafzai passively quitting school, because she was too frightened by the death threats she received from Taliban extremists, who abhor education for girls. Instead, she became even more vocal about the educational rights of children and women, survived a 2012 assassination attempt, and was a Nobel Peace Prize nominee in 2013 and 2014.*

*Imagine yourself, fully aware of the mission and vision God has placed in your heart to advance his kingdom in this world, yet held hostage to phobias, irrational worries, and destructive fears of failure, harm, or rejection. If you don't fulfill the mission God assigned to you, who will?*