

*This is a true story. Brenda was a young woman who was invited to go rock climbing, and although she was scared to death, she went with her group to a tremendous granite cliff. In spite of her fear, she put on the gear, took a hold of the rope, and started up the face of that rock. Brenda eventually got to a ledge where she could take a breather, and as she was hanging there, the safety rope snapped against her eye and knocked out her contact lens.*

*Brenda looked all around her for the lens, hoping it had landed nearby on the ledge, but it just wasn't there. There she is on a rock ledge, with hundreds of feet below her and hundreds of feet above her, and upset because her sight was now blurry, so she prayed to the Lord to help her get safely to the top and to find her contact lens.*

*When Brenda got to the top, a friend examined her eye and her clothing for the lens, but it was not to be found. Discouraged, she sat down with her climbing party – waiting for the rest of them to make it up the face of the cliff. She looked out across range of mountains, thinking of the Bible verse that says, “The eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth.” Brenda thought, “Lord, You can see all these mountains. You know every stone and every leaf, and You know exactly where my contact lens is. Please help me.”*

*Finally, they walked down the trail to the bottom. At the bottom there was a new party of climbers just starting up the face of the cliff, and one of them shouted out, “Hey, you guys! **Did anybody lose a contact lens?**” Well, that was amazing enough, but what was more amazing was how the climber found it. A tiny ant was moving slowly across the face of the rock, carrying it!*

*Brenda told her father, who was a cartoonist, about the incredible story of the contact lens, and her prayer, and the ant, he drew a cartoon picture of a tiny ant carrying a huge contact lens with the words, “Lord, I don't know why You want me to carry this thing. I can't eat it, and it's awfully heavy, but if this is what You want me to do, I'll carry it for You.”*

I think it is fair to say that there are times when all of us feel like that tiny ant carrying the heavy contact lens. A burden has been placed on us that seems too much to bear, we struggle under the pressure, and as far as we can tell, there is no good purpose for it – we see nothing of value coming from it, and like the ant, we wonder why the Lord wants us to carry it. I think we've all be there. I think we can all relate to that tiny ant to some degree or another, and this morning we will be looking at a church who most certainly could relate.

We are studying the messages sent to seven real churches mentioned in **Chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation**, where Jesus gives His unique insider perspective of what He sees in these churches – for He sees what we do not see. Jesus is in the midst of the church, He walks among the church, and He carefully examines the church. Jesus knows what is really going on, and so these messages are similar to “performance reviews” – assessments of their strengths and their weaknesses, including points of praise, points of encouragement and points of rebuke.

Last week we considered the church of Ephesus, the first church on the postal route in the western region of Asia Minor, and from all appearances, it seemed to be a great church, a happening church, a busy church, a doctrinally sound church, but Jesus said something was missing in this church – love. Their love for God and their love for others, which are two sides of the same coin, had faded. They were a church who had forsaken their first love, and as a consequence, they would lose their place, and history tells us they would eventually cease to be a church.

This morning we are pressing on, looking at the second church on this postal route – that being the church at Smyrna, and as we did last week, I want to first look at the city before we consider the church.

If someone had taken a survey of the best places to live at the end of the first century, the city of Smyrna would have made the list. The city of Smyrna was founded as a Greek colony about 1000 BC, but sometime around 600 BC., four hundred years later, the city was destroyed by the king of Lydia. Later it was ordered to be rebuilt by Alexander the Great and it was completed by one of his successors around 200 BC.

The city of Smyrna had a population of about 100,000 people in John’s day. Like Ephesus, Smyrna – which was about 35 miles to the north, was also a commercial port city with an excellent harbor to the Aegean Sea, and as such, it was a very wealthy and thriving import and export city, second only to the city of Ephesus, and today Smyrna is known as Izmir, Turkey.

Apparently, Smyrna was a city of great beauty and impressive architecture, a planned city that formed a circle around a large hill called Mount Pagos, which gave the appearance of a crown, so this city was called the crown of Asia or the Crown City. Smyrna was known for its schools of science and medicine. They had a library, a gymnasium, a stadium for their annual Olympian games, and they boasted of a theater on Mount Pagos that could seat some 20,000 spectators.

Smyrna was a religious city, and with that, there were many temples of worship to their Greek gods. At one end of the main street was the temple to Zeus and at the other end of main street was the temple to Cybele, who was considered the mother goddess of Smyrna.

In John's day, the city was intensely loyal to Rome, and they were engaged in the cultic practice of imperial worship where the Roman Emperor was worshipped as a god, in fact, Smyrna was at the epicenter of this very popular cult, and in 26 A.D, they built a temple for Emperor Tiberius.

So, Smyrna was a religious city. They worshipped their Greek gods, they were leaders in the practice emperor worship, and there was also a large Jewish population in this city and they had their own synagogue as well.

In regards to the church in Smyrna, little is known about its background – there is no mention of its founding in the New Testament, but referencing **Acts 19:10**, it is thought that the Apostle Paul or one of his companions may have introduced Christianity to Smyrna while they were in nearby Ephesus.

So, relatively speaking, outside of this hodgepodge of religious activity, the city seemed to be a great place to live – unless you were a follower of Jesus Christ. In Smyrna, if you identified with Jesus, you had better buckle up because it was going to be a very hard and bumpy ride. Smyrna means “*myrrh*” which was a highly valued spice that gives out a sweet aroma when it's crushed, and as we will see in a bit, that is a fairly accurate picture of this church – a church being crushed under relentless persecution as they stood for Christ.

That's the background, so if you have your Bible, turn to **Revelation 2:8**.

**“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:**

This letter is written to the pastor of the church in Smyrna, and to this church, Jesus reminds these believers that He is the **“first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life.”** This is similar wording to how Jesus introduced Himself to the Apostle John back in Chapter 1, and when the Bible speaks in opposites like this: **first and last**, A to Z, Alpha and the Omega, it means for us to understand that it also includes everything in between. To this church, Jesus says He existed before creation, He will exist after creation has disappeared, and He is sovereign of everything in between. Jesus is in control of their current reality, He is moving events along to accomplish His divine purposes, and they needed to let this truth sink in.

Jesus said He **was dead and has come to life**. He suffered and died, but the grave could not hold Him. Jesus is the life and He also holds the keys to death, and this church needed to be reminded that their own suffering and persecution, although difficult as it may be, was only momentary in light of eternal life. As I have said to some of you, our lives on this earth are only a “blink of an eye” when compared to eternity.

Then Jesus says to the church beginning with **verse 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. <sup>10</sup>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.**

These words from Jesus begin with **“I know.”** **How important are those two little words spoken by the Lord?** Jesus knows His people inside and out, upside and down, from beginning to end. He knows every joy and every sorrow. He knows all about the heavy burdens and crushing pressure. Jesus is the sympathetic Lord who knows because He shared in the same experiences of temptation, and rejection, of pain and suffering which is common to all. Jesus knows – and the church needed to know that He knows in light of what they were going through.

As I mentioned earlier, emperor worship was a popular cultic practice in Smyrna, and it was also a mandated practice by Rome. Once a year, all citizens were to go to Caesar’s altar, burn a pinch of incense, and simply say three little words: *“Caesar is Lord.”* That was the test applied to all citizens under Roman rule, and failure to do so was a violation of the highest law and could result in death. Just once a year, burn a pinch of incense, say *“Caesar is Lord”*, receive a certificate for doing so, and then go your own way – but that is precisely what the Christians refused to do. They wouldn’t call anyone *“Lord”* – except for Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone. They would not conform, and for that they suffered severely and death was a common reality, and would continue to be so for many years to come.

*For example, some 50 years after writing the book of Revelation, in 155 A.D., a mob wanted to shut down the church at Smyrna by getting rid of their leader – the now aged pastor named Polycarp. He was mentored by the Apostle John and may have been the pastor of this church at the time of John’s writing.*

*The hunt was on for Polycarp, so fellow believers tried to hide him in a farmhouse, but his whereabouts were revealed by a slave girl who was tortured and the authorities came to arrest the old pastor. He welcomed his captors as if they were old friends and gave them food and drink. He asked for an hour to pray before being taken to the arena. They agreed. The hour stretched into two hours. The officers, overhearing his prayers began to wonder what they were doing arresting an old man like this.*

*Polycarp was brought into the arena and instead of Polycarp begging for his life, we are told the Roman proconsul pleaded with this aged pastor to just curse Christ so he would be released. Polycarp's reply was loud and clear: "Eighty-six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury; **how then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?**"*

*The proconsul threatened him with burning, and Polycarp replied: "You threaten me with the fire that burns for a time, and is quickly quenched, for you do not know the fire which awaits the wicked in the judgment to come and in everlasting punishment. **Why are you waiting?** Come, do what you will."*

*They gathered wood, and as the soldiers prepared to nail him to the stake, he refused, saying, "Leave me as I am. For He who grants me to endure the fire will enable me also to remain unmoved, without the security you desire from nails." The fire was lit and Polycarp burned to death. As the flames consumed him, he was heard to pray, "I thank you, O Lord, that you have deemed me worthy this day and this hour to take up the cross of Christ with many witnesses."*

*Believers were allowed to bury his remains, and churches near and far from Smyrna observed this date in years to come and drew strength from the testimony of this old pastor who would not deny Christ, no matter what it cost him.*

This occurred on a Saturday – the Jewish Sabbath, and it is told that the Jews helped to collect firewood that day for this execution. The Jews in Smyrna were another group who persecuted the church. They rejected Jesus as their long-awaited Messiah, they were hostile toward His followers, and they joined forces with other pagan groups to persecute Christians – falsely accusing them of treason against Rome so the authorities would arrest them. Jesus called them the **synagogue of Satan**, implying that under the pretense of being God's people and doing God's will, they were really doing the devil's work. **Isn't it interesting that it's the "religious people" who tend to cause the most problems for true believers?**

The church at Smyrna was persecuted by those engaged in the cult practice of emperor worship, they were persecuted by Jews living in the city, and besides all that, Jesus spoke of their **poverty**. Even though the city was very wealthy, the Christians in it were living in extreme poverty. The Christians were described as destitute because they were robbed, fired from their jobs, taken from their livelihoods, and had their homes confiscated because they identified with Jesus Christ. It was economic persecution – a common type of crushing pressure that the early church experienced, and jumping ahead into the future, it will be a similar type of experience for believers during the time of the tribulation. In **Revelation 13:16-17**, we are told:

*<sup>16</sup>And he causes all, the small and the great, and the rich and the poor, and the free men and the slaves, to be given a mark on their right hand or on their forehead, <sup>17</sup>and he provides that no one will be able to buy or to sell, except the one who has the mark, either the name of the beast or the number of his name.*

In the future, for those who do not devote themselves to the Antichrist, for those who do not bow down to his image, for those who refuse to accept the mark of the beast – they will suffer economic persecution during the tribulation period.

For the church at Smyrna, Jesus acknowledged that from a worldly standpoint, they had nothing as far as wealth, or possessions, or material goods – nothing at all, and they were likely part of the homeless population – but spiritually speaking – Jesus considered them to be rich. Jesus says the truly rich in Smyrna were those suffering Christians going through terrible persecution. **How is that?**

Some time ago, I have shared with you something said by Corrie Ten Boom, “*You’ll never know if Jesus is all you need until Jesus is all you have. When Jesus is all you have, then you will discover that Jesus is all you need.*”

Because the Christians at Smyrna were so poor, they learned early on that Jesus really is all they needed, and that’s why Jesus says, “**But you are rich!**” Their suffering stripped them of everything except for Jesus, and for that, they became spiritually rich.

The church at Smyrna was a persecuted church, a suffering church – and Jesus knew it for He knew them. They had absolutely nothing, they were the poorest of the poor in a wealthy city, but did you notice that the One who knew them best did not have one single negative thing to say about them spiritually. **Don’t you find that interesting?** Not one negative word. Their suffering was not because of any wrong they had done – just the opposite. Like the Apostle John on Patmos, their

suffering was the result of identifying with Christ – living godly lives in an ungodly world, and standing firm in their faith.

If you noticed, Jesus said they would have **ten days of tribulation** which could be ten literal days or it could be symbolic for a brief period time of suffering, but however it is interpreted, for these believers, their suffering was not over as they might have hoped. The persecution would continue, it would be severe, but it would also be limited – He said **ten days**, not eleven. Although I believe God will at times give us more than we can handle so we will depend on Him, He does place limits on the trials and the hardships that we experience. Warren Wiersbe says, *“When God puts His own people into the furnace, He keeps His eye on the clock and His hand on the thermostat. He knows how long and how much.”*

Jesus says, **“Do not fear what you are about to suffer.”** At face value, those are hard words to hear, **aren't they?** That's like telling a child you are taking to the hospital for stitches *“don't be afraid, it will be alright.”* As parents, we know it will be alright in the end, but it's still hard for the child because the child does not know what we know.

In a similar way, we don't know what the Lord knows and we don't see what He sees, but if we could, maybe we would come to realize there really is no need to fear. Instead, we can trust that the Lord is going to accomplish His plans and His purposes concerning His people – and yes, it could include persecution and suffering, but Jesus says, **“Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”** In other words, trust Him – for the time of suffering in this world is very limited at best, but the duration of the joy to come – the victor's joy, will last forever.

Then Jesus speaks to us all – all who have ears, and He says in **verse 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.'**

The one who overcomes, the one who carries on, the one who perseveres, **will not be hurt by the second death.** **What is that?** If there is a second death, then it would make sense that there is also first death. The first death is the death of the physical body – something that we will all experience unless Jesus comes first to gather His church. The first death is merely death of the body, but the second death refers to the eternal separation from God. The second death is the one that sends you to the lake of fire. It refers to the final destination of torment for those who reject Christ as their Lord and Savior.

As followers of Christ, we need not fear what happens to us in the here and now, and we need not fear the second death, and if you feel like a tiny ant carrying the heavy contact lens for no good reason – remember this: ***weeping may last for the night, but joy comes in the morning.***

*Rachel Scott, a 17-year-old student at Columbine High School, was a devoted Christian teenager, open about her faith at school and unashamed to witness to others. But doing so took a toll on her reputation. She was made an outcast, betrayed and like any high schooler, she had her struggles. But through it all, she loved God greatly. Her diaries hold the words of her daily testimonies.*

*“I have no more personal friends at school, **but you know what?** I am not going to apologize for speaking the name of Jesus,” she wrote in her journal. “I am not going to justify my faith to them, and I am not going to hide the light that God has put into me. If I have to sacrifice everything I will. I will take it. If my friends have to become my enemies for me to be with my best friend Jesus, then that’s fine with me.”*

*Three weeks before the shooting, Rachel witnessed to the shooters, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. They too were bullied, outcasts and they really didn’t have any friends, but Rachel knew that all they needed was Jesus. Unfortunately, they were blinded by hate, and they even made videotapes mocking her Christian faith.*

*On April 20, 1999, the day of the shooting, Rachel was the first person shot on the school’s campus. Dylan and Eric shot her twice in the leg and once in the back. The boys walked away but returned seconds later after seeing she was still alive. Dylan grabbed her by the hair and asked, **“Do you still believe in your God?”***

*When her response was, “You Know I Do.” Eric told her, “Then go be with Him,” and he shot her in the head.*

Again, ***weeping may last for the night, but joy comes in the morning*** and that joy is found in the person of Jesus Christ.

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