

**Smyrna – The Suffering Church**  
Spilman Memorial Baptist Church  
Dr. H. Powell Dew, Jr.  
April 14, 2024

Text: Revelation 2:8-11

Purpose: Jesus has written a letter to each of the seven churches in Asia. Smyrna was one church that was going to face intense persecution, even to the point of death. His words of encouragement to them are an encouragement to us today. Even when we have nothing, we actually have everything.

One Sunday morning at a small southern church, the new pastor called on one of his older deacons to lead in the opening prayer.



The deacon stood up, bowed his head and said, "Lord, I hate buttermilk." The pastor opened one eye and wondered where this was going.

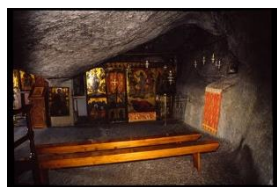
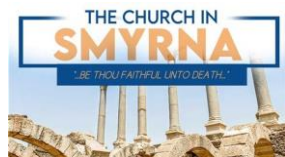
The deacon continued, "Lord, I hate lard." Now the pastor was totally perplexed.

The deacon continued, "Lord, I ain't too crazy about plain flour. But after you mix 'em all together and bake 'em in a hot oven, I just love biscuits."

He paused, "Lord help us to realize when life gets hard, when things come up that we don't like, whenever we don't understand what You are doing, we need to wait and see what You are making.

After you get through mixing and baking, it'll probably be something even better than biscuits." Amen.<sup>1</sup>

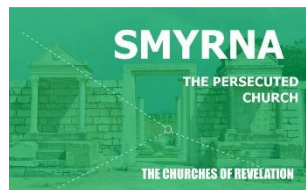
Today we come to the second church in the list of churches that John the Apostle writes to at the direction of Jesus. If you were not here last week, we have begun a series of seven sermons about the churches in Revelation which we will be examining over the next few months.



Last week we learned that John, the beloved disciple of Jesus, was serving as the pastor of the church at Ephesus. This was the same church that Paul started on his second missionary journey and then returned there for three years to minister to the church. Later Paul sent Timothy to serve this church, and in time John became its pastor.

While serving there in Ephesus, John was put in exile on the Isle of Patmos. It was from this island fortress that John wrote of his vision, or Revelation of Jesus Christ. In Revelation 1:11, Jesus said to John, *“What you see, write in a book and send it to the seven churches which are in Asia.”*

Today we turn our attention to the second church, Smyrna – the suffering church.



For us here in America, this idea of suffering for our faith may seem so very far and distant. If we keep up with the news around the world, we may have heard of a few places where believers in Jesus Christ are actually

put in prison, beaten, property confiscated, without any just cause except for the fact they are Christians.



But what would we do if we suddenly were labeled as an “undesirable” group of people? What would we do if our faith in Jesus jeopardized our wealth or health? What would we do if meeting together to pray, read God’s word, listen to a few words of encouragement from your pastor, put you in direct violation of the laws in your community and the result could mean prison or death? Would you have enough faith to stand faithful to the end? Or would you simply cave in and deny Jesus Christ?

In a few moments we will examine some very contemporary, recent, examples of believers facing persecution for their faith. First let’s examine the city of Smyrna in Revelation chapter two.

Smyrna was considered one of the most beautiful cities that the Greeks ever built. It sat on a hill rising from the sea so that it looked as if the city wore a crown. It was called the “Glory of Asia” because of its pride and beauty. This city’s history goes way back to 1000 B.C. and was destroyed 400 years later around 600 BC. Later, Alexander the Great or one of his generals took over this region and rebuilt the city and restored its glory between 301 BC. and 281 BC. The city that was once dead, was now alive. During the Roman period, Caesar worship in Asia was centered in Smyrna. This was also the location for a church founded on



the teachings of Jesus Christ. Today that city is known as Izmir and is the third largest city in Turkey.

The letter to Smyrna is one of the shortest letters. It contains no word of condemnation for the members of this church. The words of Jesus offer this church encouragement in the midst of persecution and poverty.

If you have ever done any reading on how the Romans worshipped their gods, you will remember how proud they were of their buildings, gymnasiums, and their worship of the physical body. Their temples to the various gods were beautiful and ornate. Their statues were nude, glorifying the body. Each temple attempted to outdo the next one in size, grandeur, and beauty.



But for the Christians, they were not concerned about the building in which they met; they were only concerned about being able to gather and worship, no matter the location. During this period of time, Christians gathered in homes, cemeteries, in fields, or wherever a quiet place could be found. These Jesus followers were scorned because of their lack of participation in the culturally sanctioned places of worship.



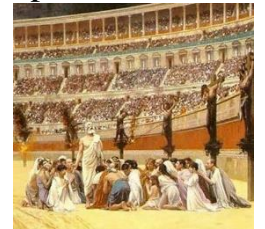
Another reason Christians were despised by the Romans was that they refused to bow down to the statues of the Caesars. Throughout the Roman Empire, statues were erected for people to come and reverence and pay homage to on a frequent basis. At first it may have started out as a small and insignificant way to honor the ruling Emperor, but over time, the demands

became more and more restrictive, that persecution naturally followed for those that refused to worship Caesar.

From Rome's perspective, they had brought peace to the areas they had conquered. The Pax Romana, the peace of Rome was actually a point of pride for Roman citizens. All dissenters were punished severely. All warfare between smaller cities and family groups had ceased. Citizens were able to travel with relative assurance of safety. There were laws, roads, and commerce flowed. In return for this peace, the emperor began to assert he was actually a god worthy of being worshipped.



Rome provided a type of political worship. John the Apostle, the writer of Revelation, was actually banished during Domitian's reign for failure to worship the emperor. Failure to worship Caesar was unpatriotic. Christians that failed to worship Caesar made them "bad citizens" and worthy of contempt, punishment, and even death.



During this period of history, many individuals were tortured, boiled in oil, roasted over hot fires, burned at the stake, or fed to the lions as entertainment for the Roman citizens in the coliseums.



Jesus Christ said to the church at Smyrna, *"I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan."* (2:9)

Jesus noticed the good works that the people of Smyrna had done, but he does not elaborate on that item. He notices they are under a tremendous amount of pressure. The word tribulation in the Greek implies an unrelenting pressure. I can see the Christians always having to be on the lookout for who they talk to, what they say, where they go, because imprisonment could happen at any moment. They were under tremendous pressure.

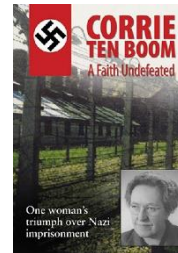
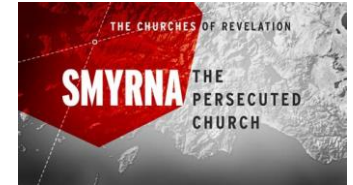
Jesus also identifies their poverty. There are actually two different words used in the New Testament to describe poverty. One is the kind of poverty that a person experiences as he goes to a job every day, but barely earns enough to pay their bills. Today we would describe these kinds of people as working “paycheck to paycheck.” A report came out last week that said over 72% of Americans have less than \$2000 in savings. Many are one paycheck away from homelessness. One of our church members met a couple getting food out of our Blessing Box last week. That couple were living in their car now. Poverty is at our doorstep.



The second group of people are described as “poor” means abject poverty or destitute. These individuals do not have **any** resources in which they can ever rise above their circumstances. Jesus describes these believers in Smyrna as this type of poor. I am certain their poverty was a result of their faith in Jesus Christ. They probably had been robbed, looted, treated like outcasts, unable to work, or even own property, all because they would not bow their knee to Caesar.

Jesus also identified these Christians in Smyrna as receiving scorn or blasphemy from the Jews that had rejected Jesus and embraced Caesar. There may have been some Jewish Christians that blended their faith in Jesus with the worship of Caesar and straddled the fence. But Jesus called those Jews and their synagogue the house of Satan.

I am sure these faithful Christians were being slandered and maligned by the Roman’s as well as some Caesar loving Jews. They needed assurance from Jesus that they would still retain their reward even under tremendous temptation to give up and worship Caesar. In verse 10, Jesus told them to not fear and to continue to be faithful. They needed to know that Jesus had not forgotten them and their lives were safe with Him.



David Jeremiah shares a story about Corrie ten Boom in his book, *Escape the Coming Night*. Corrie was responsible for saving countless Jewish lives during WWII from the long reach of the Gestapo. One time she asked her father, “I am afraid that I will never be strong enough to die a martyr.” Her father replied, “When you go on a journey, when do I give you the money— two weeks before?”

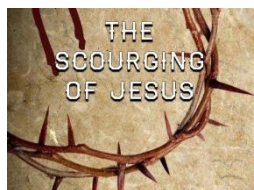
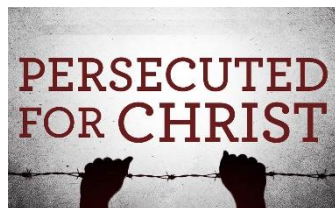
Corrie replied, “No, just before I am to leave.”

Corrie’s father replied, “Precisely, and our wise Father in Heaven knows when we are going to need things too. When the time comes to die, you will find the strength you need – just in time.”



Jesus gives Smyrna five reasons that they should be **fearless** and **faithful** until the end.

**First**, Jesus reminds them that He is victorious over death. In verse 8 Jesus said, “*These things says the First and Last, who was dead, and came to live.*” The city of Smyrna could identify with Jesus in this manner because the city was once dead, but is now alive. Jesus’ authority extends beyond the making or tearing down of cities. He is victorious over death – our final enemy. The reputation of Jesus exceeded even the power of Rome.



**Secondly**, Jesus told them that “I know.” He could identify with them totally in their:

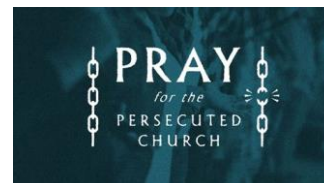
- rejection (because the crowds yelled to Jesus “crucify Him”),
- persecution (sentenced Jesus illegally to death),
- hatred (they spat upon Jesus and mocked him on the cross),
- humiliation (stripped Jesus naked upon a cross),
- poverty (throughout Jesus’ life, he claimed he had nowhere to lay his head),
- and betrayal (one of Jesus’s own disciples, Judas, betrayed Him).

And yet, Jesus took the penalty willingly upon Himself in order to redeem mankind back to God the Father. Those that turn to Christ will have forgiveness for their sins, but may suffer in the same manner as Jesus.

A true believer can withstand the persecution because our Savior understands our afflictions and difficulties.

As you study the Book of Jeremiah in the Old Testament, you will find he too was persecuted. Jeremiah stood and declared the message to the people of Jerusalem. He said “Do what you will with me. I have delivered the word of the Lord.” That takes courage to stand up when the world seeks to discredit and destroy you.

**Third** Jesus describes these believers in Smyrna as rich. According to the world's standards they are not rich. They are social outcasts and have no influence in the affairs of the world. The value system which Jesus is speaking from is opposite from the way the world views things. Jesus saw that Laodicea was a church that had tremendous earthly wealth, but was considered “wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked.” (3:17) Yet, Jesus called the members in the church at Smyrna rich.



A **fourth** way which the Christians at Smyrna were comforted was Jesus’ mentioning of 10 days. There was to be a limit to the persecution Christians would go through.

- The persecution began with Nero in 64 to 68 A.D. This was the period when the Apostle Paul was beheaded.
- Domitian ruled (95-96) while John (the writer of the Book of Revelation) was in Exile.
- While Trajan ruled (104-117), Ignatius was burned at the stake.
- Marcus Aurelius ruled (161-180) when Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna was martyred along with 10 others that day.

According to Eusebius, the ecclesial historian, Polycarp was the Bishop of Smyrna. In Feb. 156 A.D., this is recorded of

Polycarp at his death. The Roman overseer attempted to persuade Polycarp to renounce his faith due to his old age. He did not want to kill an old man that had done no one wrong. Polycarp replied, “Eighty and six years have I served Him and He never did me wrong; and how can I now blaspheme my King that has saved me?” As the flames continued around him, he said, “Thou threatenest me with fire which burneth for an hour and after a little is extinguished. But thou art ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment reserved for the ungodly. But why tarriest thou? Bring forth what thou wilt.”

The various Caesars ruled until Diocletian (303-313) who was the worst emperor of them all. Ten Caesars worth of persecution came to an end with the Edict of Toleration in 314 A.D.

According to *Foxes Book of Martyrs*, over 5 million were killed during this time.

This persecution lasted for a period and then it ended. It was several lifetimes according to our counting of time, but according to heaven it was very brief. The reckoning of time is vastly different from Heaven’s view.



**Lastly**, the rewards believers have far outweighed any achievements we may obtain here on earth. A crown of life was promised to believers at Smyrna that remained faithful until the end. They were to remain faithful

until death.

D. L. Moody once said, “We all are going to either be born once and die twice or be born twice and die once.” For those that have claimed Christ as their Savior, according to John 3,

you have been born again. When we reach the end of our life here, we will only die once and live eternally with God in a place especially prepared for us.

But if you reject this offer of Salvation, you will die once physically and spiritually you will be tormented for eternity. Do not be like the fool that says, “There is no God!” (Psalm 14:1) God’s judgement will fall one day on those that reject Jesus Christ.



Today believers around the world are being persecuted for their faith. I went to the web site, [www.persecution.net](http://www.persecution.net) (Voice of the Martyrs) and found a wealth of

resources that help the larger Christian community be aware of how other believers are being denied justice, facing persecution, beatings, property seized, imprisonment, and even death. Around the world, the church is still persecuted. Let me share four stories that are happening today.

## #1 Overseas Conversion Leads to Prison Sentence



Source: Article18, Human Rights in Iran

Date: 04 April 2024

Evin Prison, where Laleh is being held.

Photo: Flickr / sbzphoto (cc)

For some time, an Iranian woman named Laleh Saati lived in Malaysia and, while there, she was baptized as a Christian. Not wanting to return to Iran, Laleh applied for asylum, but the process continued to drag on without resolution.

Frustrated with the delay, as well as missing her elderly parents, she returned to Iran in 2017.

Since her return, Laleh had been summoned for interrogation by intelligence agents multiple times. Then, on February 13th of this year, the Christian convert was arrested at her father's home in Ekbatan Town, a suburb of Tehran. Photographs and videos of her baptism and Christian activities in Malaysia were presented as evidence against her.

On March 16th, the 45-year-old believer was brought before a judge who asked her why she risked returning to her home country, given that she had "done such things [Christian activities] outside of Iran." She was then sentenced to two years' imprisonment, followed by a two-year travel ban for "acting against national security by connecting with 'Zionist' Christian organizations."

This case clearly demonstrates that Iranian authorities are able to obtain information on the activities of asylum seekers in foreign countries and use that against them. While most Western countries acknowledge the dangers faced by Iran's Christians, asylum claims are often rejected if the judge questions the genuine nature of a religious conversion.

## **#2 Baptist Pastor Killed by Unknown Assailants**

Source: UCA News, Radio Free Asia, VOMC Contact, Democratic Voice of Burma

Reported: 04 April 2024



On March 18th, three armed men entered a computer shop run by Pastor Nammye Hkun Jaw Li from his home in Magaung township. There, the men shot the pastor twice in the stomach and, when he did not immediately die, they also shot him in the head. At the time of publishing this report, the identities of

the gunmen and the reason for the assassination are not completely evident. The pastor leaves behind a grieving wife and three children.

The slain Christian man was a well-known community leader who often participated in anti-military protests. He was also involved with a community-based anti-drug organization called Pat Jasan. The community has witnessed significant unrest because of military activity in the area. Additionally, there have been several reports of local Christian leaders being killed or arrested by members of the military junta. However, in this particular case, it is believed that Pastor Nammye was attacked due to his activities in fighting drug cultivation and distribution.

Hundreds of innocent people in Myanmar have been killed or displaced due to the ongoing violence. Military forces also commonly target Christians.

## **#3 Another Church Ordered to Remove Crosses**

Source: ChinaAid

Reported 21 March 2024



For more than 30 years, crosses were allowed to be displayed by Christian churches throughout China. However, as of 2014, the situation began to reverse. Beginning in Zhejiang Province, over 1,000 crosses were forcibly removed from Christian buildings over a three-year period. The enforcement of that campaign then spread to other provinces.

On March 10th, the Wangfenggang Christian Church in the Xiejiaji district of Huainan City, Anhui Province, received written notice from village administrators ordering the removal of a cross from the top of their building, as well as

one that was placed above the facility's door. The notice stated that the crosses were "safety hazards."

The cross above the door has been securely in place for 40 years. The one on the roof was installed five years ago in compliance with applicable building standards – plus, it passed a safety inspection. The claim from the village committee appears to be an arbitrary demand without basis. It is uncertain if there are any legal premises for this notice and whether the village committee has the authority to enforce such a demand.

Pressure on the country's Christians from various levels of government has been increasing throughout China as the Chinese Communist Party endeavours to take control of all aspects of society.

#### **#4 New Look at Evidence Against a Long-Imprisoned Christian**

Morning Star News, AsiaNews  
Reported: 04 April 2024  
Reshma Bibi, Anwar's sister, has been waiting for his release since 2002.

Photo: Morning Star News



In 2002, Anwar Kenneth received a court verdict sentencing him to death, purportedly for defending Christianity in the days following the September 11th attacks on the New York World Trade Centre. He had written a letter in which he defended his Christian faith and, as a part of that, expressed his belief that Muhammad, the founder of Islam, was not a prophet of God.

Anwar was consequently convicted of blasphemy for allegedly insulting Muhammad – a conviction that carried a mandatory death sentence. The Lahore High Court upheld the verdict in June 2014. However, in a significant move that took place on March 12th of this year, the Supreme Court of Pakistan sought opinions on whether the letter Anwar had originally sent falls within the definition of blasphemy. Lawyer Abdul Hameed Rana argued that Anwar, as a devout Christian, had the right to express his religious beliefs, which do not accept Muhammad as a prophet. The lawyer also indicated that the letter did not contain any derogatory language which could be interpreted as blasphemy.

Pakistan's blasphemy laws have been used against religious minorities for many years. While a death sentence for blasphemy has never been carried out, some accused believers – including Anwar – have spent many years in prison under the threat of death.

This message is just as relevant to us today as it was to the church at Smyrna. Even though we are not persecuted – **yet** – here in America, we need to have our hearts prepared and ready if that day comes. Would you be willing to lay down your life for your faith? A Christ worth dying for should also be a Christ worth living for.

Are you ready to live for Christ?

As Jesus said to the church at Smyrna, *“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.”*

Let us be overcomers!

**LET US PRAY**



**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> Mikey's Funnies, Dec 2, 2016 - forwarded by Therese Brennan

<sup>2</sup> Four Stories taken from: [www.persecution.net](http://www.persecution.net) (Voice of the Martyrs) – accessed 4/8/2024