

The Persecution of the Synagogue of Satan

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[0 : 00] Now, let's turn to our Bibles, Revelation. We're in the book of Revelation, chapter 2, verses 8 to 11. Short but very powerful and punchy passage, Revelation chapter 2, verses 8 to 11.

Let me pray for the reading and preaching of God's Word. Heavenly Father, address us from your Word again so that our lives are defined and directed not by the course of this world but by the foundation of your Word.

Enlarge our vision of Jesus once again as the one who has conquered death, who has the keys to death and Hades, who is alive forevermore, so that we as your disciples do not fear, but instead are faithful unto death.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Please stand for the reading of God's Word from Revelation chapter 2, verses 8 to 11. Amen.

And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, the words of the first and the last who died and came to life. I know your tribulation and your poverty, but you are rich.

[1 : 45] And the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer, 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. 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. This is God's holy and authoritative word. You may be seated. If we're not serious enough about our faith to die for Jesus, then we are not serious enough.

This is not some radical extremist talk from Sean. This is what Jesus says in this main exhortation of this passage.

Be faithful unto death. There's a lot of wars going around in the world right now, and think of all the soldiers who have died in wars throughout human history for the sake of their king or their general or their country or their family.

[3 : 21] If even unbelievers can do that, should we do less as Christian soldiers, as soldiers of Christ Jesus, as 2 Timothy 2 says.

And I don't want us to think that this is a lofty, unattainable standard. This is the normal standard for the Christian, because Jesus said in Matthew 16, 25, for whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for Jesus' sake will find it.

So how can we live that way? Revelation 2, 8, 11 teaches us how. It teaches us that by looking to Jesus, who died and came to life, we too must endure persecution and be faithful unto death.

And I'm once again going to follow the overarching structure of these seven letters to the churches in Revelation 2 and 3 by first looking at the recipient to the angel of the church in Smyrna, and then the author, the words of the first and the last who died and came to life, and then the evaluation of Jesus of this church, and then his exhortation to the church, and then his invitation, finally his promise of rewards for those who do endure and conquer.

So let's look at the recipient of this letter. This letter is addressed to the angel of the church in Smyrna. Once again, the letter is addressed to the heavenly representative of this earthly church to show that there is a real vital connection between what's going on here in our church even now and what's going on in the throne room of God in heaven.

[5 : 00] Though the church is on earth, it is an eternal and heavenly reality, and each church, no matter how small, every local church has the listening ears and the watching eyes of the Lord God himself upon them.

Smyrna, along with Philadelphia, are two churches that hear only commendation and no correction from Jesus among the seven churches. I hope we can be a church like that.

Smyrna is the second church on the list. Philadelphia is the second to last church on the list. They match each other in their content as well in that they only receive commendation, and they also are facing persecution from the synagogue of Satan, as Jesus calls them, which is a reference to wicked Jews.

And the first church on the list, Ephesus, that we looked at last week also matched the last church on the list, Laodicea, because they are both on the verge of losing their very identity as a Christian church.

So there's kind of this matching structure, mirroring structure of these seven letters. And the middle three churches all receive a mixture of commendation and correction. They're all struggling with different levels, degrees of compromise with false teaching and idolatry and immorality.

[6 : 19] And the overall effect of this structure, by putting the struggling churches right in the middle, in the center, and the really, really struggling churches right at the beginning and at the end, John is here conveying to us in the structure of the seven letters that by and large, the capital C church, the universal church, in this life, in this broken world, are struggling.

Struggle is a normal part of the church's life. Only two out of the seven churches receive only commendation. But Jesus is nonetheless among all of those churches, all of those lampstands, tending to them to make sure that the light of the gospel does not go out.

And in our passage today, Jesus is concerned with Smyrna. Smyrna was a major city in ancient Asia Minor. It's where the city Ismail is today in modern-day Turkey.

It was a major city on the western coast, about 40 miles north of Ephesus. And according to the Annals, which is a work of history written by a Roman named during the reign of Tiberius to that of Nero, it was written by a historian named Tacitus.

He writes that Smyrna was one of the 11 cities in the Roman Empire that was vying for the honor of becoming the host city of a new temple dedicated to Caesar and to Roman religion.

[7 : 47] So much like how cities nowadays vie or compete for the privilege of hosting the Olympic Games or the World Cup because it's lucrative for them culturally, economically, it increases their prestige as a city.

So in a similar way, Smyrna was in the running, competing for their dubious honor of having this pagan temple dedicated to Caesar and to Roman religion.

And one of Smyrna's chief claims, their main arguments for why they should be chosen was that they were the first city in the Roman Empire to build a temple in honor of Rome.

This was in Asia Minor. And this was apparently a convincing argument because the Roman Senate did award Smyrna the second temple dedicated to Roman religion and to Caesar.

And so this historical context is important because it shows us just how prominent the emperor cult was in Smyrna, the worship of Roman religion was in Smyrna, and how much hostility Christians would have faced for refusing to join their pagan worship and for refusing to bow down before Caesar and the idols of Caesar and confessing him as their lord.

[9 : 00] They were deemed an affront to the patronage of the Greco-Roman gods, and they were seen as an unpatriotic bunch that threatened the Roman civic order.

As a derogatory term, the Romans referred to Christians as atheists because they refused to worship the Roman gods. So it is not surprising that how Jesus identifies himself in the second half of verse 8.

As I mentioned last week, the phrase, the words of, is more literally translated, thus says.

So it's the Old Testament formula for introducing the words of God himself. Thus says the Lord.

Jesus is speaking here with full divine authority. And the description of Jesus himself harkens back to the glorious vision we saw earlier in Revelation 1, 17 to 18, where Jesus said, Fear not, I am the first and the last and the living one.

I died, and behold, I am alive forevermore. And I have the keys of death and Hades. In saying that he is the first and the last, Jesus is identifying himself with the Ancient of Days, the Lord God, who describes himself in chapter 1, verse 8, as the Alpha and the Omega.

[10 : 20] It explained to us that Alpha is the first letter in the Greek alphabet. Omega is the last letter. And so together, they represent the first and the last. It represents God's sovereignty over all, all of history, and in all time.

The risen Jesus Christ is the second person of the triune Godhead. He is the first and the last. And if Jesus is the first, that means Jesus is the sovereign Lord over the earliest history that we can imagine.

I mean, we had, I think, the men's, during the men's retreat this past weekend, one of the icebreaker questions was, what's the earliest memory you have of your father? Whatever the earliest memory of the most ancient and oldest creatures in the world might be, Jesus was there before that.

Whatever the oldest thing you can imagine might be in creation, Jesus was there before that because he's the first. He was in the beginning with God and he, the word was God, as John 1 says.

That means he has seen it all. But Jesus is also the last word. When all the kings and the kingdoms and the nations and institutions have passed away, Jesus will remain.

[11:37] Every Roman emperor from the times of the early church, Nero, Domitian, others have all faded away. But Jesus remains forever.

He is the last. And that's helpful for us because that means no matter how messed up your past is, no matter how sordid your history, no matter how dark your past was in the past, Jesus is sovereign over it.

He's the first. He was there. And no matter how uncertain your future might be, you can also rest assured that Jesus is the last.

He is sovereign. There's no gap in Jesus' knowledge and there's no gap in his rule. And this is meant to be a comfort to the suffering church in Smyrna.

Jesus also reminds them that he is the one who died and came to life. And Jesus is emphasizing that because the church in Smyrna is facing persecution and they need to be faithful unto death.

[12:45] Jesus is not telling the Christian Smyrna to go where he hasn't himself already gone. Jesus has already been faithful unto death. He died and came to life. And now Jesus is reassuring them, don't be afraid of dying.

I've already died and I have risen. As Jesus said early in Revelation 118, fear not, I am the first and the last and the living one. I died and behold, I am alive forevermore and I have the keys of death and Hades.

Throughout human history, no man and no woman has ever been able to reopen the doors of death once it has been shut. Even in examples of the reanimations of dead people in Old Testament that you see when the prophets raised people from the dead, it's temporary reanimation.

It's not a resurrection, a full resurrection because they will die again. Nobody can reopen the doors of death once it shuts except for Jesus.

Jesus defeated death. He was raised from the dead and he's alive forevermore. He has the keys to the doors of death and Hades and that means that the door can never be shone on him.

[14:02] And he is our Lord. That means we do not need to fear death because Jesus has the keys. In order for us to obey the later exhortations in verse 10 to not fear and to be faithful unto death, we need to know that Jesus is the one who died and came to life.

In order not to fear death, we have to fear Jesus. We need to have an appropriately big and high view of Jesus because that's the only time when we will have no fear in the face of death.

The key to Christian courage in the face of persecution and death is knowing that Jesus is the one who has conquered death. So that's the recipient and the author of this letter.

Now we get to the third part, Jesus' evaluation of the church in Smyrna. He says in verse 9, I know your tribulation and your poverty, but you are rich. And the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

Once again, we hear those two comforting words of Jesus, I know. Jesus knows the tribulation of the church in Smyrna. He knows the hardships that they are facing and enduring.

[15:16] Sometimes in the midst of suffering and heartache, we just want someone to know what we're going through. We just want someone to understand. And Jesus assures us he knows.

When we are snubbed and downtrodden, Jesus knows. When we are discriminated against because of our faith and allegiance to Jesus in the workplace, at school, Jesus knows.

When we are overlooked because of our Christian convictions, when we are falsely accused or ridiculed by people because we believe what the Bible actually says, Jesus knows.

We are people who are known and loved by our Savior. And Jesus knows the true reality of things. The church in Smyrna suffered from poverty. Their earthly poverty is likely connected to the fact that there was persecution.

the worship of the Roman emperor was so deeply embedded in the culture of Asia Minor at the time that it would have been virtually impossible for someone to climb the socioeconomic ladder without compromising and worshipping the emperor.

[16 : 37] To refuse to participate would mean being labeled and being ostracized as an unpatriotic and nonconformist as a threat to the civic order.

You would lose networking opportunities. You would lose opportunities to make an impression. You would offend the powers that be, people who are in charge of giving out posts and positions.

So it's not surprising that the church in Smyrna was impoverished. And this is not uncommon in parts of the world where there's intense persecution against Christians to lose their jobs, fired for no reason whatsoever than the fact that they go to church every Sunday.

It's not as obvious in our context, but in subtle ways, Christians here, even here, can face some economic pressure because of their faith.

more and more stories are popping up throughout the country of Christian teachers in public schools getting fired for believing that God has created human beings either as male or female and for refusing to use a student's preferred pronoun or for informing that student's parent about his or her gender identity in school.

[18 : 01] A Christian mail carrier named Gerald Groff just won a unanimous decision at the Supreme Court a few months ago, June 2023, but he was previously fired, and that's why he went to court, by the U.S. Postal Service for refusing to work Sunday shifts because he was saying that Sunday is reserved for worship and for church.

Though it's harder to measure, several of our own church members in academia have suspected that the way they expressed their Christian faith in their personal statements and or in their diversity, equity, and inclusion statements, which are often mandatory nowadays in academic applications, negatively affected their faculty applications, their chances.

I know that these are comparatively speaking to some of the persecution that people, Christians throughout the world are facing, small, but they can nonetheless be real economic pressures. And when that happens, we can take comfort in knowing that Jesus knows our poverty.

And not only does Jesus know our poverty, he also assures us, you are rich. As Christians, we might be poor on earth, but we are rich in heaven because as heirs of God in Christ, we have an inheritance that is imperishable and undefiled and unfading kept in heaven for us.

As Jesus taught us, we do not seek as Christians to lay up for ourselves treasures on earth where wrath and moths destroy and where thieves break in and steal. Rather, we seek to store up our treasures in heaven where moths and rust do not destroy and where thieves do not break in and steal.

[19 : 48] So whether you are investing in stocks or bonds or gold or in the U.S. dollar or in Bitcoin, I'm sure some of you guys have it, I know you do.

Our world's currencies, all of them, every single one of them will lose all of their value when we die. Every single one. You will not have a single value.

All those who accumulate wealth here on earth are stockpiling an expiring currency. But as Christians, we have our eyes set on eternity and we are storing up heavenly riches and we have to remember that our lives here on earth is just a blip in light of eternity.

So even if we are poor here, it's temporary, it's momentary compared to the riches that we will enjoy forever. So don't be disheartened that you are poor, especially if you become poor because of your allegiance to Jesus.

Remember that you are actually rich, richer than any of your friends or peers or people on the Fortune 500 list can imagine. It's better to be like the church in Smyrna that's poor materially but rich spiritually than to be like the church in Laodicea which we'll see later in Revelation 3 which is rich materially but poor spiritually.

[21 : 20] The Christians in Smyrna were also suffering poverty, not only poverty but also the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not but are synagogue of Satan. Instead of recognizing Jesus as their long-awaited Messiah, many Jews sadly rejected Jesus and in turn slandered the Christians.

We see many examples of this throughout the book of Acts. In Acts 13 when Paul's ministry attracts large crowds in Antioch and Pisidia, the Jews are filled with jealousy and they begin to contradict everything that Paul is saying.

They start to revile him. They even go so far as to incite the political leaders of the city to stir up persecution against Paul and Barnabas. In Acts 14 in Iconium when a great number of both Jews and Greeks come to saving faith in Jesus because of Paul and Barnabas' ministry, it says that the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers.

In Lystra, in Acts 14, 19 the Jews opposed Paul, persuade the crowds to stone Paul and leave him for dead. In Thessalonica and Acts 17, once again, the Jews get jealous of Paul and Silas and then they incite a rabble to form a mob and to set the city up in an uproar and they accuse Paul and Silas of acting against the decrees of Caesar saying that there is another king, Jesus.

That last instance is a good example of how the Jews may have slandered the Christians in Smyrna. Even though faithful Jews also refused to worship the Roman gods because of their antiquity and because of their long-term presence within the Roman Empire, the Jews were tolerated by the Roman authorities.

[23 : 03] They let the Jews, instead of making sacrifices to Caesar as God, they let him just offer sacrifices to him as an emperor to honor him and so they kind of let them slide in some ways even though some Jews were syncretistic and were idolatrous.

And so the Romans, because they saw Christians as arising from the Jews because he was born out of the Jewish synagogues and the earliest Christians were all Jews, they naturally saw Christianity as a Jewish sect because they proclaimed the Jewish Messiah.

But it was all too easy for the Jews than to turn around and disavow those Christians and say, oh no, actually those guys, they're not Jews. They're not one of us.

They're dangerous. Here's a newfangled religion. They don't honor Caesar like we do. They proclaim Jesus as king. They're a threat to the Roman Empire, to Caesar himself.

This is a false accusation, of course, because Jesus explicitly said his kingdom is not of this world. He said, render unto Caesar what is Caesar, render unto God what is God's.

[24 : 22] We're taught in 1 Peter 2.17 to honor the emperor. We're taught in Romans 13 to be subject to the governing authorities, not to rebel against them. But despite all of this, the Romans often believed the slander of the Jews and Christians became easy scapegoats.

And recall that Smyrna is distinguished for their dedication to Caesar. They have two, not one, two temples dedicated to Caesar and to Rome.

And so the slander that Christians refused to worship Caesar would have been a very damning critique for them. But once again, Jesus sees past the appearance of things and knows the reality of things.

The church in Smyrna was poor, but from God's point of view, they're rich. Similarly, though the Christian Smyrna have been disavowed by the Jews, from God's point of view, they are the true Jews.

And the Jews who slander them are the false Jews. Jesus calls them those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. This is not anti-Semitic.

[25 : 30] Jesus was an ethnic Jew. Rather, this is the penetrating observation of the Jewish condition by the Jewish Messiah. It's similar to what Jesus says in John 8, 44, that instead of being children of Abraham as the Pharisees claimed to be, they are actually children of the devil because they were lying and trying to kill Jesus.

And that's what the devil does. He lies and he kills. The Jews who slandered the church in Smyrna were physical descendants of Abraham, but they were not the spiritual descendants of Abraham.

And this is a very important theological point for understanding many different parts of the New Testament. The promises that God gave to the Jews in the Old Testament do not belong to the children of the flesh, but rather to the children of the promise, as Paul argues in Romans 9.

It's those who have faith in Jesus Christ who are the true children of Abraham, and therefore they are the true Jews. For it says in Romans 2, 27 to 28, no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical, but a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart by the spirit, not by the letter.

And by this, I don't mean that God doesn't have any plans for ethnic Jew and for the nation of Israel. I do believe he has plans for them as Romans 11 indicates, but only those Jews who put their faith in Jesus as the Christ and the Messiah and the Savior of the world will be saved.

[27 : 01] The Christians in Smyrna were slandered by their own people, by their fellow Jews. And this also happens to Christians all over the world. In the Muslim world governed by Sharia law and in many devout Buddhist and Hindu circles as well, converts to Christianity are disowned by their own families and persecuted by their own tribes.

And throughout history, many Christians have also been slandered and maligned by other so-called Christians. Those who belong to other denominations who say, we're the true Christians. They're the heretical sects. We don't believe the kind of fundamentalist thing that they believe. But the Lord knows those who are His.

True Christians are not necessarily those who belong to the most historic denominations or have nice church buildings. true Christians are those who can trace their spiritual lineage and their heritage to Jesus Christ.

So whether you are a Jew or a Gentile in terms of your ethnic ancestry, true Christians are those who confess with their mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in their heart that He was raised from the dead.

[28 : 21] And according to Jesus' evaluation, the church in Smyrna were faithful Christians and therefore true Jews. And that brings us to the main exhortation of this letter, the church in Smyrna in verse 10.

Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison that you may be tested and for 10 days you will have tribulation.

Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life. There are two main commands here. Do not fear and be faithful unto death.

And Jesus tells them not to fear even as He's telling them they're about to suffer. That's a hard command. Sometimes for us we fear even when there's just a remote possibility of suffering. But Jesus tells them you're about to suffer. You're going to certainly suffer but do not fear. And He warns them that the devil is about to throw some of them into prison.

[29 : 21] This is a helpful thing to remember because it's not the devil that's physically throwing them into prison. It's the Romans who are doing that. But Jesus ultimately attributes this to the devil because He is the spiritual ruler among the sons of this world.

He's the driving spiritual influence. It's an application of the teaching in Ephesians 6.12 that we as Christians do not wrestle against flesh and blood but against the rulers and against the authorities and against the cosmic powers over this present darkness.

Against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. So even when people persecute us and slander us and even kill us our true enemy is not them but the devil.

The spiritual forces. And I'm not saying that these people who do evil are not responsible. They are responsible for what they do. But we need to remember the demonic influence behind them.

It's easy if you're facing severe persecution for a long time to forget this. To give you an example Armenian Christians ethnic Armenians not theological Armenians ethnic Armenian Christians have historically suffered much Islamic persecution.

[30 : 40] During the Armenian genocide in the late 1800s and the early 1900s around 1 million Armenians most of them professing Christians were killed were killed by the Ottoman Empire. And just last month September the New York Times journalist Nicholas Kristof reported that there has been a quiet genocide happening among the Armenians in Azerbaijan in the Muslim country.

And then on September 20th this year Azerbaijan forcibly seized the Armenian enclave there in Azerbaijan and they displaced 19,000 Armenians for historically Christians.

19,000 people all of a sudden no home no place. And when you suffer so intensely at the hands of others it's easy to antagonize them and hate them as your enemies.

And there are some Armenians who unfortunately hate Muslims and hate the Azerbaijani and have exacted eye for eye violent retribution.

but Jesus reminds us here that our true enemy is not flesh and blood but the devil the spiritual forces of the heavenly places.

[31 : 51] Jesus also tells them that they will be tested and have tribulation for 10 days. Since the book of Revelation uses numbers in highly symbolic ways this is likely also not literal 10 days but symbolic for a defined complete period of time.

10 can be a symbol for completeness. It's also likely an allusion to the 10 days of testing that Daniel and his friends endured during their sojourn in the Babylonian Empire.

We have already seen in the first two chapters that Revelation often alludes back to the book of Daniel so the connection is likely intentional. And also Daniel chapter 1 is the only place in the Old Testament where a period of testing for 10 days is mentioned and it's mentioned there three times. It's emphasized and repeated. And so this is actually a very appropriate biblical allusion because just like the church in Smyrna facing pressures and persecution from the Roman Empire Daniel and his friends faced persecution and pressures from the Babylonian Empire.

The Romans demanded that Christians worship Nero and Domitian and other Roman emperors just as the Babylonians demanded that Christians worship Nebuchadnezzar and Darius and other Babylonian kings.

[33 : 08] The Romans sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the temple in 70 AD just as the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the temple in 586 BC.

That's why after 70 AD the Jewish literature often from the time often refers to Rome as Babylon as a kind of code language for the epitome of a wicked city that is in opposition to God.

And that's the way the book of Revelation refers to use the word Babylon. It uses the name seven times to refer to the city that's in opposition to God. So in Daniel 1 we see Babylon King Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar embark on a systematic program to assimilate the Jewish religion and culture into Babylonian religion and culture.

I think for some of you guys who read my Ask Your Pastors post on food and eating I think already familiar with this he takes all the furnishings of the Jewish temple and then he puts them in the temple of his God the treasury of his God.

This is his attempt to assimilate Jewish religion and worship into Babylonian worship and then he handpicks some very gifted Jewish youth so that they can be taught the literature and language of the Chaldeans and so that they could be competent to stand in the king's palace as court officials.

[34 : 30] This is the Babylonian re-education program to indoctrinate and assimilate the most promising Jewish youth into Babylonian culture.

Nebuchadnezzar also gives these Jewish youth new Babylonian names. They previously had names that honored the Hebrew God the Ar God the Lord God the Yehovah but now they give them new names that honor the pagan Babylonian gods.

And lastly as part of this assimilation program these gifted youth would be assigned a daily portion of the food that the king ate and of the wine that he drank. This was intended to give these youth Jewish youth a taste for Babylonian luxury and to convey the message that you are to be dependent on me as king.

I am your patron. I am your provider. You are my subject. You come to me. You're dependent on me. Because people usually don't bite the hands that feed them.

But because Daniel and his three friends were loyal to God they resist this assimilation program and in order to maintain their distinct Jewish identity Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah they referred to each other by their Hebrew names and they refused to defile themselves with the king's food.

[35 : 50] Instead they have vegetables and water brought in separately so that they don't have to depend on the king's choice provisions and they enter a period of testing for ten days to prove that they can keep up with these other Jewish youth who are eating at the king's table and eating the king's food and that they can be just as healthy and fit to serve as they are.

And God cares for Daniel and his three friends and at the end of the ten days of testing he says that they are better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youth who ate the king's food and not only that at the end of the Babylonian assimilation program it is said that among all the gifted Jewish youths that were singled out by the king none was found like Daniel Hananiah Mishael and Azariah and in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom.

So Daniel and his three friends endured ten days of testing trying to maintain their distinct identity as people who are loyal to God and they come out of that trial period as people who are ten times better ten times more effective than all the wise men of the Babylonian empire and this is why they were able later on when they're actually threatened with death Daniel's three friends are threatened with being thrown into the furnace Daniel's thrown into the lion's den they are faithful unto death because they were faithful during their testing to maintain their distinct identity you can see now why this is the perfect Old Testament example to allude to here in Revelation 2 Jesus is exhorting the church in Smyrna to follow the example of Daniel and his three friends you will be tested and for

ten days you will have tribulation but do not fear what you are about to suffer I will be with you the same way

I was with Daniel and his three friends maintain your identity as Christians and be steadfast to me do not worship the Roman emperor or their pagan gods it's far more subtle for us but the world's assimilation program is still going on all around us we are bombarded with messages and images all day long that seek to make us conform to the world's values and priorities and ideologies in the ads that we see in the shows that we watch in the books and magazines that we read in the newspaper articles that we read in the lessons we are taught in schools and the things that we hear from our neighbors it's all over if you watch either of our country's parties national conventions you can very clearly see how the political leaders of our country try to co-opt Christianity to advance their political agenda but our ultimate allegiance is not to any earthly ruler or party but to King Jesus we bow our knees before no one but King Jesus and faithfulness to Jesus does not guarantee that the Christians in Smyrna will get out of their imprisonment and make it out of their period of testing alive because Jesus says in verse 10 be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life the days of testing might very well end in martyrdom and as Christians we need to be prepared for that because here in the West we live in relative comfort as Christians it's easy for us to forget this call to discipleship but I want to remind you again of what Jesus said in Matthew 16 if anyone will come after me let him deny himself and follow me if anyone does not carry his cross and follow me he's not worthy of me what does it mean to carry our cross cross is an instrument of death when we carry our cross we're saying

Jesus I'm going to be faithful to you unto death when Daniel's three friends were threatened with being thrown into the burning fiery furnace for refusing to bow down to the golden statue of King Nebuchadnezzar they said this if this be so our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace and he will deliver us out of your hand O king but if not be it known to you O king that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up God can deliver us from the persecution and from death and from the furnace but even if he doesn't we will not serve your gods and we will not bow down before you that's the call to Christian discipleship the center for the study of global Christianity based at Gordon

[40 : 55] Commonwealth Theological Seminary estimates that more than 70 million Christians have died as martyrs for their faith over the last 2,000 years 70 million more than half of those martyrs died not long time ago in a far away land but in the 20th century under fascist and communist regimes martyrdom has been the reality of the church and of Christians throughout our history 2nd century church father Tertullian once wrote to those who are persecuting the church quote we multiply when you reap us meaning when you cut us down we multiply when you reap us the blood of Christians is seed indeed the blood of the martyrs has been the seed of the church brothers and sisters we have to remember this survival and security are not the highest goals of our earthly lives survival our highest goal is faithfulness to Christ loyalty to Christ service to Christ love of Christ and those who are faithful unto that

Jesus says I will give you the crown of life it's amazing paradox right it's those who die for Jesus who are going to get life the crown of life is a picture of a wreath that the victor in the Olympic games would receive it's also talking about how Christians who are faithful to him to the end will share in the reign of Christ in the rule of Christ because only kings wear crowns and Jesus elaborates in verse 11 the one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death later revelation 20 14 tells us explicitly that the second death is the lake of fire it's a reference to hell and the judgment of God the wrath of God in hell so let me ask you what's the point of prolonging our earthly lives for a few more measly years only to succumb to the second death which is eternal we as humans make so much provision for our lives here on earth don't we we try so hard to fight the ineluctable progress of old age we use anti-aging creams which I should use actually and I call them character lines and then we use

I don't know we do strength exercises because we don't want to lose muscle mass we eat healthy food we dye our hair gray hairs or pluck them it's all fine but do you spend as much time thinking about the second death for those of you who do not yet know Jesus I want to ask you are you prepared for the second death heaven is real hell is real and it's only those who carry their cross and follow Jesus who will inherit eternal life Jesus said in Matthew 10 20 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 are you gripped more by the reality of the first death than the second death are you gripped more by the

fear of man than the fear of God the reason why we as

Christians need not fear the second death is because Jesus has conquered sin and death on our behalf it says in Romans 6:23 for the wages of sin is death but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord as sinners all of us deserve death and eternal punishment in hell but instead of giving us what we deserve God showed us mercy by sending his only son Jesus Christ to pay the penalty for our sins by dying on the cross for us and it's because the price of death has already been paid that we are no longer under the dominion of death that death no longer has claim on us but instead we are destined for eternity so we also need to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and be faithful unto death because that's the way we conquer not by killing but by dying Polycarp was born in 69

AD and he was discipled by Apostle John himself and he Apostle John wrote the book of Revelation and eventually Polycarp became the pastor and overseer the elder of the church in Smyrna the very church that John is writing to here in this letter not John Jesus is writing to in this letter and it seems that Polycarp heeded the message of Jesus to be faithful unto death because Roman authorities assisted by their Jewish have respect for your old age swear by the fortune of Caesar repent and say away with the atheists atheists are Christians that's how Romans derogatorily called swear and I will set you at liberty reproach Christ but Polycarp declared eighty and 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 then said to him

[47 : 20] I have wild beasts at hand to these I will cast you unless you repent but he answered call them then for we are not accustomed to repent of what is good in order to adopt that which is evil and it is well for me to be changed from what is evil to what is righteous but again the proconsul said to him I will cause you to be consumed by fire seeing you despise the wild beasts if you will not repent but Polycarp said you threaten me with fire which burns for an hour and after little is extinguished but are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment reserved for the ungodly but why do you tarry bring forth what you will and then he was burned at the stakes and this is recorded in the martyrdom of Polycarp ancient writing we can only do that be faithful unto death if we know that

Jesus is the one who died and is alive forever more he has conquered death and the second death has no hold on us so let's be faithful unto death brothers and sisters faithful unto death let's pray yes Lord Jesus we confess with our mouth that you are Lord and when you confess our name when you profess our name in the heavenly court before God the father how can we deny you here in the courts of men

Lord define our reality take hold of our minds and take hold of our hearts so that we see things the way you see them Lord so that we can see Jesus the way you see them Lord so that we might be faithful unto death in Jesus name we pray amen