

There is, perhaps, no greater way to distinguish the saints from those who do not know the Lord Jesus Christ than when you hear them sing. When you hear the songs of redemption in contrast to the songs of the world, it is as different as night and day, is it not?

I would invite you this morning to take the infallible record of the Word of God and turn to Revelation chapter two. It is always a privilege to open up the Word and allow it to speak to our hearts. And as we continue to make our way through this book, verse by verse, we find ourselves this morning in chapter two beginning in verse eight as we look at the Lord's message to the Church at Smyrna.

Let me read the passage to you this morning, Revelation two verses eight through 11.

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: "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. 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. 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."¹

As we have seen thus far in our study of Revelation, it becomes very obvious to us that the Lord is intimately involved in his Church and he goes to great lengths to communicate that to us. His eyes are depicted as penetrating lasers that see everything in verse 14 of chapter one. We see in chapter two and verse one that he moves amongst us as a shepherd would care for his sheep. And we see that he is therefore intimately aware of every minute detail in our lives and in our church and in every church that belongs to him. He is aware of every conversation. He is aware of every attitude. He is sovereign over his church. And as we study the Word of God we see that he is able to see, obviously, the good and the bad in every church and in his infinite wisdom and love he comes and he speaks to us with supernatural precision.

Through his Word, as we have seen thus far, he brings to us comfort and conviction. He brings praise as well as rebuke and he brings us wisdom as well as warning. We saw this, in particular, in his letter to the Ephesian in the first seven verses of chapter two.

We should all find great comfort in this. We do not have some detached, uninvolved God that is unconcerned with what is going on in us. But, rather, he is the head of this organism called the Church and even as the head of our body is not only aware of, but in control of the body, so, too, is the Lord with his Church.

¹ Revelation 2:8-11.

Now, with this I mind we want us to be comforted with the fact that whatever happens in our life, whatever happens even in our church, whatever church—and I know there is several represented here today—but whatever happens, we know that God is in it, that God is in control, that he “causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose.”

And we see this demonstrated in a very dramatic way as we look at the church here in Smyrna where God uses persecution to purify and empower these dear people and to, therefore, strengthen and invigorate their testimony to others. Has this not been true in my life, in your life? Has not God used persecution and suffering to strengthen us? Like the mighty oak, the branches of our faith are strengthened far more by the winds of pain than by the sunshine of pleasure.

People sometimes ask me, “Pastor, I need to know how to have better purity in my life and more power in my Christian life because, frankly, my Christian life has become rather boring and mundane and routine.” And my answer is simply to tell them what the Word of God says. In summary what we have to do is learn the Word of God, know it and then obey it and then begin to serve him. And do you know what is going to happen when you really serve the Lord? You are going to be persecuted. It is inevitable. It is going to happen. People will not like you. People will slander you. People will mock you. They will even hate you and some will want to kill you. And then when this happens what you must do is humbly endure it and as a result of that humble endurance, you will develop purity of life and power. That is the answer.

Peter told the suffering saints in 1 Peter 5:10, “And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you.”² Indeed, if you struggle with life dominating sins and you have no real power in your life and your joy is directly linked to circumstances so that if things are going good you are happy and if things don’t go good you just fall apart, the remedy for that is to know the Word, obey the Word, begin to serve him faithfully. When you do, you will be persecuted. When you are persecuted endure it humbly and those things will gradually go away.

The Spirit of God will purify your life and empower you. In fact, we know that as we look at the Word of God trials really expose counterfeit faith, but strengthens and refines genuine faith. For this reason James said in James one, beginning in verse two, “Consider it all joy,”³ a mathematical term. It means calculate forward, look forward.

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.⁴

² 1 Peter 5:10.

³ James 1:2.

⁴ James 1:2-4.

And, beloved, this is the heart, really, of what we have before us as we study what happened at the Church of Smyrna.

Now the word “Smyrna” literally means *bitter*. And this is an appropriate name that captures the essence, quite frankly, of what the saints experienced in this Church, in this place. They were, many of them, destined for martyrdom. In fact the Greek word translated “Smyrna” was used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew word for myrrh. Myrrh is a resinous aromatic type of a gum that is extracted from certain kinds of shrub trees and they used that extraction for perfume as we are reminded when the magi came to baby Jesus. But also for embalming as we read in John 19 when Nicodemus brought that ingredient to be used for Jesus’ burial. In fact, on the cross Jesus was offered wine mixed with myrrh. The myrrh was used as an anodyne or some kind of a pain reliever, obviously, you will recall, he declined it in Mark 15.

But the city of Smyrna had many groves of these trees from which they could get this myrrh. And when they would harvest myrrh the process required them to take certain parts of the plant and to crush it. And as they did so it would produce an extract of these precious contents. Like this plant, the Church at Smyrna was crushed by suffering causing it to emit a fragrant aroma that gave testimony to their unwavering love for Christ and his grace in their life.

Now, to give you a little bit of a history lesson about Smyrna, it was about 35 miles north of Ephesus. It was an ancient city dating back about 3000 BC. But it began as a colony of Greece some time before or around 1000 BC. And it was captured and destroyed by the Lydian kingdom whose capital was Sardis and that happened in 627 BC.

And we know, historically, that it remained a barren wasteland until it was finally reestablished in 290 BC by two of Alexander the Great’s successors. The city was planted on a very steep hill that overlooked a magnificent gulf shore harbor and this provided that city with great maritime opportunities.

We also know that it sided with the Romans against the Mithradites, against Carthage and even against the Seleucid kingdom to the east. And in 195 BC they even built a temple to *dea Roma* the goddess of Rome. And for its loyalty later on, Tiberius reciprocated by building a temple to his honor in AD 26. But in AD 177 it was utterly destroyed by an earthquake and then the Emperor Marcus Aurelius rebuilt it.

So this gives you a little background of the city.

Smyrna, by the way, was also the birth place of Homer, the poet. And it was also a place, even in John’s day, that was noted as a center for learning and especially understanding the principles of science and medicine and so forth. And it still exists today as the Turkish city of Izmir with inhabitants of about 250,000 people.

Now in John’s day it was a beautiful seaport city with what was called “the street of gold” that curved around the *pegos* or “the hill” and it was adorned with a number of

temples and buildings. In fact, the temple of Cybele, known by the Greeks as the Cybelene Mother was on the far eastern side and then as you moved around the hill you had the temples of Apollo, Asklepios, and Aphrodite in the middle and then the temple of Zeus on the far western side.

Now emperor worship was mandatory for every Roman citizen of this day under the rule of Domitian and every year they were required to offer incense on an altar to Caesar. And when they did that they would receive a certificate of compliance. If you did not have this certificate of compliance you would not be able to do many of the things that were necessary to survive, like buying and selling and having a job and so forth, because you had violated the law. The penalty in most cases was imprisonment or death. And that became the fate of many of the believers in that day. There was also a large Jewish population there. They were allowed to practice Judaism, but they hated Christians as we will see.

Now, beloved, I want you to understand that despite this hideous environment, it was in this place that one of the most powerful and pure churches thrived. And here in the Lord's letter to them, we see that he offers no rebuke, no condemnation, only commendation for their faithfulness and comfort in the midst of their perilous situation. Indeed, the trials they endured made them all the more fervent for their love for Christ, as we have seen in our own lives. To be sure, I believe, the purifying fires of persecution tend to burn off the dross of compromise and set us ablaze with the glory of God.

Now I have divided these passages into four simple parts. We are going to see the *praise*, the *precept*, the *persecution* and the *promise* that God gives this church. And I would challenge you this morning to examine your love for Christ in light of the testimony of faith and endurance and purity and power that we see at the church in Smyrna.

First of all, notice God's *praise* here in verse eight. "And to the angel,"⁵ or it could be translated the messenger or pastor, "of the church in Smyrna write:"⁶ And, beloved here, as in each letter, the Lord emphasizes a certain aspect of his character that was previously manifested to John in his vision and his appearance there in chapter one. And so now figuratively he identifies himself as, "The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this."⁷

"The first and the last."⁸ May I remind you that this is a clear identification of Jesus' deity. It is a title that God used to identify himself to the prophet in Isaiah chapter 44 verse six when he identified—or I should say—addressed Israel saying, "This is what he Lord says, Israel's King and Redeemer, the Lord almighty, 'I am the first and I am the last. Apart from me there is no God.'"⁹

⁵ Revelation 2:8.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ See Isaiah 44:6.

So what the Lord is saying here to the Church at Smyrna is simply this. *It is me, the eternal God writing to you, the one who has always existed in eternity past and the one who will always exist in eternity future.* And what a comfort this must have been to those suffering saints to know that the eternal preexistent, self-existent God has stooped to attend to their needs, the one who existed before time began and the one who will continue to exist when time comes to an end.

Notice he also said, “The one who was dead and has come to life.”¹⁰ Now here we are reminded that he is the eternal transcendent spirit of God who chose to enter time and space as the incarnate Son. Then, you will recall, he who is eternal life chose to die an ignominious death upon a cross in his humanness to be the perfect and final sacrifice for sin. And I emphasize, *in his humanness*, because only his humanness could die, not his deity. Then he victoriously conquered death in his resurrection. This is what he means as he communicates this to these people and to all of us. You will recall what Peter said in 1 Peter 3:18. Christ was, “put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.”¹¹ So this is astounding to think that Christ died and he came back to life because, indeed, *he is eternal life.*

Now, child of God, I want you to seize this great truth with all of your heart. I want you to savor the implications of this in your life. You must understand that we serve a God who is not constrained by time or space. We serve a God that transcends them all. Nothing that even exists in time or space in any way impacts him. And because we are united to him in Christ as his children we, too, are able to transcend the limits of time and space. Even though our bodies will die, our soul will live forever and our bodies will one day be resurrected and reunited with our soul.

For this reason the apostle Paul rejoiced by quoting the prophets in 1 Corinthians 15 verse 54. Here is what he said.

But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP in victory. O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore [in other words, in light of this] my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.¹²

Now this is precisely the same intention that he has with the message that he gives the saints at Smyrna when he says, “[I am] The first and the last, who was dead, and has

¹⁰ See Revelation 2:8.

¹¹ 1 Peter 3:18.

¹² 1 Corinthians 15:54-58

Revelation 2:8-11

come to life.”¹³ In other words, he is saying, “Even as I experienced death and rose victorious over the grave, so, too, will you who are mine.” So, as Paul says, “Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.”¹⁴

John reminds us of this promise that Jesus made in John 11 verse 25 where he said:

I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die.¹⁵

What an enormous comfort this would have been to those suffering saints in Smyrna.

Now notice what he says to them in verse nine. “I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich).”¹⁶

You see, friends, there is the praise. As we are going to see later on, the Church at Laodicea thought they were rich, but he tells them that you are poor. These people were poor materially, but spiritually they were wealthy. He says, “I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and [I know] the blasphemy,”¹⁷ literally the slander against you, “by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.”¹⁸ Literally this could be translated, “I am fully aware of your tribulation, even your poverty and the slander against you.”

Tribulation is an interesting term. In the original language it is *thlipsis*. It literally means *pressing* or *pressure* and we go back to the idea of the myrrh that is extracted by pressure. It denotes being pressured, here in this context, by something outward, some outward force that crushes you in body and spirit, something that is producing great affliction and oppression brought on by their enemies. And as a result of this we see that it produces poverty, and the poverty that is mentioned here in this text comes from a Greek term that refers to not just somebody that is poor, but it is a term that is used to describe abject poverty, total poverty, the type of poverty that a beggar would have, someone that has nothing at all.

The point here is he is aware of the relentless, oppressive persecution that has deprived them of their work, that has put them into prison where they can't earn a living that has, in many cases, robbed them of everything. “Yes, I am aware that you are destitute materially, but you are rich spiritually, so rejoice in your spiritual riches.” And, again, there is no hint of condemnation in this letter.

¹³ Revelation 2:8.

¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 15:58.

¹⁵ John 11:25-26.

¹⁶ Revelation 2:9.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Interestingly enough, James uses the very same words for poverty and riches in James two and verse five where we read, “Did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?”¹⁹ A rhetorical question, and the answer is obviously yes he has.

So the Lord is saying, “I am fully aware of your tribulation and your poverty, but you are rich. I am fully aware of the blasphemy, the slander against you by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.”²⁰

Now there is no reason to believe otherwise than he is referring to Jews who were physical descendants of Abraham, but they were not true Jews spiritually because inwardly they did not meet the divine standard of a circumcised heart, a love for God and his Son. So they were not Jews in the truest sense.

The converted Jewish rabbi, the apostle Paul gives clarity to this very issue in Romans chapter two and verse 28. He says there:

He is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.²¹

So, indeed, these wicked haters of Christ Jesus their Messiah were spiritually of the synagogue of Satan; what a shocking statement. “You are of the synagogue of Satan.”²² You see, they had aligned themselves with the pagans of Rome, but not only with them, but also with Satan himself making them no better than the heathen idolaters that they so detested.

As I think about this, false religion is always the greatest foe of Christianity. Darkness has no fellowship with light, none whatsoever.²³ And by far over the years I have noticed that the greatest opponents of our church have been those who were deceived and those who are zealous of their version of the truth. And, certainly, Satan is a master counterfeiter to give people what appears to be the truth and they believe it, many times with all of their heart and yet it is a lie.

Now ancient historical documents reveal to us that there were basically six categories of slander that the Jews primarily used against the Christians to incite the Romans against them. First of all, they were called Atheists because, you see, the people, including the Romans, could not understand how that there would be a group of people that worshipped a God and yet there are no images of this God anywhere around.

¹⁹ James 2:5.

²⁰ See Revelation 2:9.

²¹ Romans 2:28-29.

²² See Revelation 2:9.

²³ See 2 Corinthians 6:14.

They were also called cannibals based upon a willful misunderstanding of the elements of the Lord's Supper where Christ used the wine to symbolize his blood and the bread his body. They were also accused of immorality and unrestrained lust because they greeted each other with a holy kiss and they also had love feasts which they said was nothing more than an opportunity for sexual orgies. They were also accused of being home wreckers because when converts came to Christ many times their spouses and their families would abandon them. They were also accused of being what was called *incendiaries* because they predicted the world would eventually be burned with fire in the flames of divine judgment.

And the one that got them probably in the most trouble was the slander of being politically disloyal because they refused to worship Caesar and pronounce him as Lord; as well as they refused to worship the pantheon of Roman gods.

So with this smorgasbord of calumny against them, we can see that it was very, very difficult for them to survive there in Smyrna as one who confessed Jesus as Lord, because for you to say *that* meant all of these hostilities would come your way. In fact, history records numerous mass executions of Christians in this place, one of which we will examine more closely in a few minutes.

And so the Lord is saying, "I know all of this. I know all of this."

But, friends, think with me for a moment. Isn't it a peculiar characteristic of our flesh to doubt the wisdom of God as well as to doubt his goodness and his sovereignty? Isn't it easy for us when a trial comes our way to be like Job? And we have a sense of wanting an audience with God because, "God, obviously, you don't have all the facts, because if you had the facts this wouldn't be happening to me. So, Lord, we need to sit down and I need to explain some things to you so once you have all of the information then you can judge appropriately."

And then after we give him that explanation of the facts, we demand that he judge in our favor. And, of course, our version of the facts are always hopelessly biased in our favor. Isn't that how we tend to be?

So we come to God many times when suffering comes our way and we say, at least in our heart if not outwardly, "Oh, God, why is this happening? God, this isn't fair," rather than saying, "What? God, what should I do in the midst of these great adversities that will give you glory? Lord I am not going to ask you *why* because there is no way that I could possibly understand your answer even if you were to explain it to me. I don't have the capacity to understand that. Moreover, Lord, that would be a blasphemous thing for me to do because you are God and I am not. And I have no right to demand an explanation from you. So, Lord, I will not ask *why*, but I will ask *what*. God, what would you have me do to give you glory in the context of what I am suffering? Because, Lord, I trust in you as a good God, as a faithful God and as a sovereign God who has ordained all things for my

good and your glory.” And, beloved, that was the attitude that we see here with our brothers in sisters in Christ at Smyrna.

So knowing all of this the Lord comforts them and he is saying to them, literally, “I know all of this. I know every minute detail of what you are experiencing, but I want you to stay faithful. I want you to rejoice in your riches in Christ Jesus.” So therein is the praise.

Secondly, we see the *precept* or the instruction. And it is very brief. Notice in verse 10 he says, “Do not fear what you are about to suffer.”²⁴ And later on in the verse he says, “Be faithful until death.”²⁵

Obviously he is aware that more affliction is to come. But I want you to notice, dear friends, there is no promise of relief here, only blessing. Often we want relief more than blessing, don’t we? And I would caution you here. Whenever that is your attitude it betrays, once again, a lack of faith in a good and faithful and sovereign God. So don’t fear. I want you to be faithful.

And then, thirdly, he tells them of their *persecution* that is coming. “Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days.”²⁶

First of all, just briefly, there is no exegetical reason to interpret 10 days other than 10 days. We don’t know what all was happening there. I have heard all manner of things explained with respect to these 10 days. But, evidently there was just 10 days of something that was going to happen to them.

And then he says, “Be faithful until death.”²⁷ Now I want you to notice something very important here. I want you to notice that as we look at this text we see that God has advanced knowledge of what is about to happen to them which proves not only his omniscience, but his sovereign wisdom in allowing these future trials to occur. Yet, isn’t it interesting, *it is the devil that is responsible for their suffering*. He is the one who tempts us to doubt. He is the one, as we read Scripture, that causes us to complain, to cower in fear, to compromise. In fact, *satan* is a Hebrew word that means adversary and the Greek word for *devil* literally means *slanderer*. And, indeed, he is our adversary. He is the one that slanders us. He is also the slanderer of God.

And in Smyrna we see here that he was the one influencing the enemies of the saints to slander them. That is the point. For this reason Satan is also called the accuser of the brethren in Revelation 12:10 where we read that he accuses the brethren before our God day and night.²⁸

²⁴ Revelation 2:10

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Revelation 12:10.

Parenthetically, may I remind you that Satan is not in hell as many times people want to assume that he is. But, rather, he travels between the throne of God and earth. We see, here, that the throne is the place where he constantly accuses us and demands that God abandons us. But also we know at times he is upon the earth.

Peter has said in 1 Peter 5:8, “[Our] adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”²⁹ And, indeed, he is the one that sows discord, the seeds of discord and deception in the Church. He is the one that slanders other believers and accuses men to God and men to God and rips families apart and churches apart and so forth.

And, child of God, as you think about this, aren’t you thankful that we have an advocate with the Father? What a precious truth that is. “Jesus Christ, the righteous,”³⁰ as we read in 1 John two, *he himself is the propitiation for our sins*. In other words he is the one that has satisfied the wrath of God through his shed blood on our behalf. So therefore there is no condemnation against us. Because Jesus is our great high priest in Hebrews 7:25 we read that “He is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for [us].”³¹

Satan can accuse us all he wants, day and night, but there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,”³² Romans 8:1. And Jesus said in John 10:29, “No one is able to snatch [us] out of the Father’s hand.”³³ Wonderful truths!

So the Lord is saying to them, “Yes, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison that you may be tested and you will have tribulation 10 days,” but I want you to notice , “*faithful until death*.”³⁴

Again, I think of what the Lord told Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:13. He said, “[I] will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it.”³⁵ I think as well of Paul’s thorn in the flesh. The text says it was a *messenger of Satan that was sent to buffet him*.³⁶ And I believe that was referring to a slanderer or a group of slanderers that constantly attacked him.

And you will recall that Paul begged God three times for relief, but God said, “No, I won’t give you relief. But I will give you blessing.” And he says, “My grace is sufficient for you.”³⁷

²⁹ 1 Peter 5:8.

³⁰ 1 John 2:1.

³¹ Hebrews 7:25.

³² See Romans 8:1.

³³ John 10:29.

³⁴ Revelation 2:10.

³⁵ 1 Corinthians 10:13.

³⁶ See 2 Corinthians 12:7.

³⁷ 2 Corinthians 12:9.

To which Paul replied:

[Oh] most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.³⁸

We have a second century document called the *Encyclical Epistle of the Church at Smyrna* concerning the martyrdom of the holy Polycarp. I want to read some of this to you. He was the pastor of the Church at Smyrna about 50 years after this letter was written. And in it we have a detailed description of the tribulation that he endured because he confessed Jesus as Lord. I want to share some of his testimony with you this morning.

In this document it begins, quote, "The whole multitude marveling at the nobility of mind displayed by the devout and godly race of Christians cried out, 'Away with the Atheists. Let Polycarp be sought out.'"

Now as we continue to read this document we see that the leader of the city wanted him to be brought into the stadium to be a spectacle for the people. We read how that at first he stayed in the city, but then Polycarp agreed with some of his friends that he probably should go the countryside to escape them and so he went to stay with some friends.

And we read, quote, "And he was engaged in nothing else night and day than praying for all men and for the churches throughout the world according to his usual custom," end quote.

But as we read on we discover that the authorities pursued him there and he slipped away to another dwelling, but his pursuers happened to seize two youths of his own household. We don't know what relation they were and these men tortured these youths until one of them confessed where Polycarp had gone.

Let me read what happened next. "His pursuers," quote, "then along with horsemen and taking the youth with them went forth at supper time of the day of the preparation with their usual weapons as if going out against a robber. And being come about evening to the place where he was, they found him lying down in the upper room of a certain little house from which he might have escaped into another place. But he refused saying, 'The will of God be done.'

"So when he heard that they were come he went down and spake with them and as those that were present marveled at his age and constancy, some of them said, 'Was so much effort made to capture such a venerable man?'"

He goes on to say, "Immediately then, in that very hour, he ordered that something to eat and drink should be set before the men, as much as they needed and cared for, while he

³⁸ 2 Corinthians 12:9-10.

besought them to allow him an hour to pray without disturbance. And on their giving him leave he stood and prayed being full of the grace of God so that he could not cease for two full hours.

“To the astonishment of them that heard him in so much that many began to repent that they had come forth against so godly and venerable an old man,” end quote.

And as the story goes we see that they bring him back into the city. They put him upon an ass and a man, Irenarch the Herod who was the leader of the city and his father, we are told, are on a chariot and they come out to greet Polycarp and they take him and set him between them. And the document goes to say that they told him, “What harm is there in saying, ‘Lord Caesar’ and in sacrificing with the other ceremonies observed on such occasions and so man mare sure of safety?” To which Polycarp kind said, “I shall not do as you advise me.”

And as we read the story they began to curse him and insult him and they threw him off of the chariot that was moving and he dislocated his leg in the fall. And yet we read, quote, “But without being disturbed as if suffering nothing, he went eagerly forward with all haste and was conducted to the stadium where the tumult was so great that there was no possibility of being heard,” end quote.

Evidently he was taken into an area where he met before a group of leaders of the city and the proconsul and they began to persuade him to deny Christ. And they repeatedly asked him, quote, “Swear by the fortune of Caesar, repent and say, ‘Away with the Atheists.’” But instead we read that he looked into the vast crowd and waved his hand and said, “Away with those Atheists.”

Then the proconsul continued to urge him saying, quote, “Swear and I will set thee at liberty. Reproach Christ.” To which Polycarp declared, “Eighty and six years I have served him and he never did me any injury. How then can I blaspheme my kind and my Savior?”

And when the proconsul yet again pressed him and said, “Swear by the fortune of Caesar.” He answered, “Since they art vainly urgent that as though sayest I should swear before the fortune of Caesar,” Polycarp went on to say, “And pretendest not to know who and what I am. Here me declare with boldness that I am a Christian and if you wish to learn what the doctrines of Christianity are, appoint me a day and thou shalt hear them.”

To which the Proconsul replied, “Persuade the people.” But Polycarp said, “No. To thee I have thought it right to offer an account of my faith. For we are taught as Christians to give all due honor to the powers and authorities which are ordained of God. But as for these, I do not deem them worthy of receiving any account from me.”

The proconsul then said to him, “I have wild beasts at hand. To these I will cast thee except thou 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 thee to be consumed by fire seeing thou despisest the wild beasts, if thou wilt not repent.”

Polycarp said, “Thou threatenest me with fire which burneth for an hour and after a little is extinguished, but art ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment reserved for the ungodly. So why tarriest thou? Bring forth what thou wilt.”

Now as we read on we see that the proconsul and the people were absolutely astonished and the proconsul sends a messenger three times into the stadium to announce, “Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian.” And we read that the proclamation caused the multitude of the heathens and the Jews in the Stadium to explode in, quote, “Uncontrollable fury.” And they demanded that a lion be released.

But, as we read, the animal tortures had already been finished and so they said, “Well, then burn him alive.” And we read that the people went out and they gathered wood. They even went into shops and baths to find things to burn. We read, “Especially the Jews, according to custom, were eagerly assisting them in it.”

Then we read that when the pile was ready Polycarp calmly laid his garments aside and he took off his sandals. And he said immediately then they surrounded him. But the text says, “Immediately, then, they surrounded him with those substances which had been prepared for the funeral pile. But when they were about also to fix him with nails he said, ‘Leave me as I am. For he that giveth me strength to endure the fire will also enable me, without your securing me by nails, to remain without moving in the pile.’”

So we read that they bound his hands behind him and he ascended the pile. And there he prayed this prayer, quote, “Oh, Lord God almighty the Father of thy beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ by whom we have received the knowledge of thee, the God of angels and powers and of every creature and of the whole race of the righteous who lived before thee. I give thee thanks that thou hast counted me worthy of this day and this hour that I should have a part in the number of thy martyrs, in the cup of thy Christ, to the resurrection of eternal life, both of soul and body through the incorruption imparted by the Holy Ghost, among whom may I be accepted this day before thee as a fat and acceptable sacrifice according a thou, the ever faithful true God has foreordained. Wherefore also I praise thee for all things. I bless thee. I glorify thee along with the everlasting and heavenly Jesus Christ, thy beloved Son with whom to thee and the Holy Ghost be glory both now and to all coming ages, amen.”

As the story goes they then kindled the fire and suddenly they witnessed something miraculous. And here is how they describe it, quote, “The fire shaping itself into the form of an arc like the sail of a ship when filled with wind encompassed as by a circle the body of the martyr. And he appeared within not like flesh which is burnt, but as bread that is baked or as gold and silver glowing in a furnace. Moreover we perceived such a sweet odor coming from the pile as if frankincense or some precious spices had been smoking

there.

“At length, when those wicked men perceived that his body could not be consumed by the fire, they commanded an executioner to go near and pierce him through with a dagger. And upon doing this there came forth a dove and a great quantity of blood so that the fire was extinguished and all the people wondered that there be such a difference between the unbelievers and the elect of whom this most admirable Polycarp was one,” end quote.

Beloved, can't you somehow hear the voice of the Lord resonating even in his heart and in his mind during this time, “I am fully aware of your tribulation, even your poverty, the slander against you, but I don't want you to fear what you are going to suffer. I want you to be faithful even until death.”

So the Lord finally gives a promise here in verse 10. He says, “Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”³⁹

The crown here is the *stephanos* (stef'-an-os) crown. It was the victor's crown awarded to athletes or some victorious general. And the idea here is that there is a reward, there is an outcome to your faithfulness.

By the way, this is not some crown that you are going to get some day in heaven that you put on your head. It is not something attending eternal life. *It is eternal life*. In fact, it could be translated, “the crown which is life.”

Beloved, what a marvelous promise. May we never lose the excitement of this blessed and eternal hope. My, what an incentive for faithfulness and what a proof of genuine saving faith, to be an overcomer who perseveres in the faith. As we study it biblically we see that is always a mark of a true believer.

Verse 11. “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.”⁴⁰

Indeed, though we all must die physically the first death, the overcomer has the promise to be delivered from the horror of the second death, the never ending punishment of an eternal hell.

I have no doubt that many tears of joy streamed down the cheeks of those dear saints in Smyrna as they heard this letter read to them. And may I challenge you to examine your heart this morning? Are you an overcomer? Do you trust in the sovereign God come what may? Are you like those that Jesus described in Luke eight verse 15 one who has “heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance.”⁴¹

³⁹ Revelation 2:10.

⁴⁰ Revelation 2:11.

⁴¹ Luke 8:15.

I pray it is so.

Oh, the grace that once did save and keeps my soul secure,
Because of him I fear no grave and by his power endure.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank you for these eternal truths and we pray that by the power of your Spirit you would cause them to change us. Make us more conformed into the image of the Lord Jesus Christ. Speak especially to those that know nothing of the Savior. Spirit of God, how I pray that this will be the day that you will break through their recalcitrant walls and cause them to see their sin and the Savior and repent and believe and confess you as their Savior and their Lord. We ask this in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen.

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