

“Endurance” | *Revelation 2:8-11*

Ecclesia

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What is the most beautiful place that you have ever visited?

Beaches (2)

Mountains

Japan

Waterfalls (2) - Iguacu Falls

This is the kind of place we are dealing with in our text today.

According to inscriptions on some of the coins of the time,

Smyrna was “first in Asia in beauty and size”

Founded about 1000 B.C., Smyrna is the only city of the 7 cities in Revelation that is still in existence today.

(Modern day Izmir)

It was closely associated with the Phoenix

(bird that comes back to life, rising from the flames)

City essentially destroyed in about 600 B.C.

but rebuilt in 290 B.C.

It was a city that had been resurrected.

Smyrna was located about 35 miles north of Ephesus on the harbor

(You can see the seven cities - mail route)

Smyrna’s beauty came first from the logical way it was laid out
rectangular blocks with well-paved streets

Its stadium was well known for the games hosted there.

It had a well-known library.

It’s public theater was the largest in Asia, seating 25,000 people.

In 195 B.C. Smyrna built a temple to goddess Rome

and was also well-known for its temples to Zeus and Cybele

Rising up above the city of Smyrna was mount Pagos

On top of the mountain was Smyrna’s acropolis

There was a street that ran from the temple of Zeus

around the mountain to the temple of Cybele.

This street was well-paved and contained many of the town’s prosperous business

It was known as the “Street of Gold.”

The businesses along this street rose up to form a crown on the mountain.

(Coins contained crown image - slide)

The ancient writer Aristedes said this about Smyrna:

the city is as a great statue sitting with her feet in the sea, and her head rising to heaven and crowned with a circlet of beautiful buildings.

The city was blessed with a beautiful location and beautiful climate.

It was also birthplace of the poet Homer.

We are not really sure about how Christianity started in Smyrna.

It's possible that the first introduction came from Priscilla and Aquilla

(Acts 18 we read about Priscilla and Aquila accompanying Paul as he journeyed to Ephesus where they stayed behind as he went on.)

Maybe it was from believers present at Pentecost.

Whatever the case, there was a Christian community in Smyrna and they had an stressful relationship with the Jewish community there.

You see, Christianity sprouted out of Judaism.

For a number of years, Christians were seen as a denomination of Judaism.

Because the Jews had been conquered by the Romans, they were protected in terms of their religion.

They were not required to worship the Roman gods or to worship the imperial cult (offering sacrifices to the emperor).

The relationship between Jew and Christian had been deteriorating for some time After the Jewish temple was destroyed, Christians began to be excommunicated from some of the synagogues for being heretics.

They felt that the Christians worshipping Jesus as "king" threatened their privileged relationship with the Romans.

This was particularly true in Smyrna.

So, with all that groundwork laid, let's look at the letter to the church at Smyrna.

Remember that, when Jesus addresses each of the churches in Revelation, he does so referencing a piece of his identity.

To the church at Smyrna, Jesus writes

"These are the words of the first and the last, who was dead and came to life"

To the city who claimed to be first in Asia, Jesus says

"here are the words of the only one who is truly worthy to be first."

To the city that had been destroyed and brought back to life,

who was closely associated with the Phoenix, Jesus says,

"here are the words of the one who was dead and came back to life."

To a Christian community who were facing the real threat of persecution and even death, Jesus writes as one who has defeated death.

Jesus, even from the beginning is addressing the specific needs of the congregation to whom he is writing.

Jesus begins, "I know your affliction..."

Isn't this true?

Jesus knows what it is like to be persecuted.

Jesus knows what it is like to be falsely accused.

Jesus knows what it is like to be unfairly targeted.
Jesus knows what it is like to be put to death.

As the book of Hebrews says,

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” (Hebrews 4:15)

The path of discipleship is none other than one of being willing to follow Jesus in his sufferings.

The Apostle Paul writes:

“that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:10-11 ESV)

Even Jesus warned the disciples:

“Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. (Matthew 24:9 ESV)

Jesus tells the church, “I understand”

“I know what you are going through.”

He also tells them, “I know your poverty...”

There are two words in Greek that can be translated as “poverty”

One of them, *penes*, means “having nothing superfluous”

The other, *ptochos*, means “having nothing at all, destitute”

This second term is the one Jesus uses of the Smyranean Christians.

Those that were attracted to Christianity were often among the poor to begin with.

Add to that that Christians were well-known for the generous spirit

(giving to those that had need - even giving away what little they had)

Without the protection of being considered a part of the Jewish community,

Christians would often have problems finding jobs

(they could not be a part of trade guilds because they wouldn't make sacrifices to the emperor)

There is also evidence of the Christian community being the target of mobs

coming and looting their homes and businesses

Jesus reminds that, even though they are materially impoverished,
they are rich.

One thinks of Jesus' teaching:

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19-21 ESV)

Or the epistle of James:

Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?
(James 2:5 ESV)

The prosperity gospel (health and wealth gospel) is a lie.

It says, God's desire is for you to be blessed.

Therefore, pray, so that you can have that big house,
new car,
new job,
bigger bank account,

God wants, so claim your blessing.

This is not the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Jesus says, "I know your poverty, even though you are rich."

rich in faith
rich in family
rich in community
rich in knowledge
rich in holiness
rich in communion

There is more to this life than material blessing.

Jesus goes on, "I know the slander . . ."

William Barclay lists six different kinds of slander that Christians were accused of
cannibalism - this is my body broken for you, this is my blood (unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no part of me)

lust and immorality - early church celebrated "love feasts" - meals of inclusion

breaking up homes - unless you hate your mother and father, you can't follow me

atheism - refusal to worship at Roman temples or make sacrifice to emperor

political disloyalty - one true king/lord

incendiarism (stirring up trouble)

" . . . on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan"

We need to be really careful here.

Verses like this have been taken out of context and used to attack the Jewish community.

You can't generalize here.

Jesus is not talking about all Jews,
but this specific community that was persecuting Christians.

Christians were writing here as a persecuted minority.

As Christianity has risen to the majority, this language has been twisted
and people have said, "See, even Jesus said that the Jews were of the synagogue of Satan"

This was a local attack on a local Jewish community that was singling out Christians and persecuting them.

The Hebrew term *satan* does not mean the ruler of hell,
a guy with horns and a pitchfork
the enemy of God
or anything like that

The Hebrew word *satan* means “adversary” or “accuser”

It is the term for the prosecuting attorney in a trial.

Jesus is saying that they belong the synagogue of the accuser.

“You are about to be thrown in prison and even worse - death.”

This was the reality the church was facing.

So often, we hear Jesus’ words in the gospels about taking up our own cross and we spiritualize it.

Bad job, difficult children, hard relationship, physical problems, even some minor annoyances

“My cross to bear”

But what about those that are literally facing death for their faith in Christ.

From the city of Smyrna, we have a letter from Ignatius of Antioch which is commonly known as the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*

Polycarp was bishop of Smyrna and was put to death for refusing to deny his faith in Christ.

The tension between Jews and Christians in Smyrna was so bad that history tells us that the Jews even gathered wood on the Sabbath day to make the fire that would burn Polycarp.

In that letter, Ignatius describes the persecution that many Christians were experiencing:

And truly, who can fail to admire their nobleness of mind, and their patience, with that love towards their Lord which they displayed?— who, when they were so torn with scourges, that the frame of their bodies, even to the very inward veins and arteries, was laid open, still patiently endured, while even those that stood by pitied and bewailed them. But they reached such a pitch of magnanimity, that not one of them let a sigh or a groan escape them; thus proving to us all that those holy martyrs of Christ, at the very time when they suffered such torments, were absent from the body, or rather, that the Lord then stood by them, and communed with them. And, looking to the grace of Christ, they despised all the torments of this world, redeeming themselves from eternal punishment by [the suffering of] a single hour. For this reason the fire of their savage executioners appeared cool to them. For they kept before their view escape from that fire which is eternal and never shall be quenched, and looked forward with the eyes of their heart to those good things which are laid up for such as endure

(The Martyrdom of Polycarp, Ignatius of Antioch)

“Taking up one’s cross is more than a metaphor of dying to yourself, it is a call to be faithful even to the point of death.”

For those that are “faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

An interesting note here:

Just like there are two Greek words for poverty, there are 2 words for crown
diadema - crown of royalty
stephanos - crown given to victor in a race or games

The word here is the second.

Jesus is the only one who is worthy to wear the royal crown
He alone is King of kings and Lord of lords
He alone can sit on the throne

We, who are faithful to the end,
will receive the crown of the victor - the laurel wreath

Not only that, though - we will not be harmed by the 2nd death
(eternal death, eternal separation from God)
This is why Jesus addressed the church as the one who was dead and came back to
life.

The letter closes as all the letters do:

“Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

So, what is the Spirit saying to us?

What are the trials we are facing today?

I felt safe saying we don't face the kind of persecution that the Christians in Smyrna were

But what do we face?

trials of sin/temptation, financial, marital, relational, physical (illness), mental illness
(depression, anxiety, fear, etc.), busyness, apathy

Story of missionary going to China

saw underground church - met in secret

chance that they could get raided (arrested) at any minute

after spending some time with them, time to leave

“How can I pray for you?”

“Oh no, no. We need to pray for you.”

(depend on God every day, every minute for very existence)

(easy for you to go through your day, week, without even acknowledging God)

When church was getting started - we all assembled around the monumental task at hand;
it brought us together; we had to depend on God for everything

As time has gone on, is it possible that we don't have that common goal.

We've got to be pressing on/enduring, faithful in the midst of our persecution

If satan can't attack us/get us to sin, he will keep us busy.

We must push on - focus on the goal - and endure . . . together.

forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for
the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:12-14 ESV)