

## “To the Death!” (Revelation 2:8-11)

This morning, I'd like to talk to you about some important topics. How many of you watched game three of the American League Championship series yesterday? It was an amazing game, wasn't it? Roger Clemens versus Pedro Martinez. These two pitchers are future Hall of Famers. It was an incredible match up and certainly one of the most entertaining games of the year.

Enough about baseball. How many of you received this mailing? An invitation to the JC Penny VIP One Night Only Sale! Yes, tonight from 6:30-9:30, you can save 30% on all regular prices, an extra 40% on all red-ticket clearance prices storewide, and an extra 15% on the already reduced sale prices storewide! What a sale!

Now, these two special events may have their place but if I attempted to talk with a dying person about sports or shopping, he or she is no longer interested. Such a person now sees other things as more important. People who are dying recognize what we often forget, that we are standing on the brink of another world.

I want to tell you a secret: you are going to die. You entered into life with an impending death sentence. As a result of sin's curse, you will one day die. Now you may live to be a 100, but you will still die. And in light of eternity, 100 years will seem like a blink. But dying of old age is not our concern today. Rather, in Rev 2:8-11, Jesus challenges you and me to lay down our lives, being “faithful until death.”

**1. The Commission (2:8a).** “**And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write.**” This letter is sent to the church in Smyrna. Smyrna represents every persecuted church in every age, and every persecuted believer in every cultural setting. The Greek word “**Smyrna**” means “bitter.”<sup>1</sup> It's been said, “The trials of life can make one bitter or better.” For the Smyrna believers their trials were making them better. Can you say the same?

**2. The Character (2:8b).** Jesus states that He is “**the first and the last.**”<sup>2</sup> This title is a quotation from Isaiah 41:4; 44:6; and 48:12. In Isaiah 44, the Lord exhorted Israel to not be afraid of her enemies but to be faithful witnesses (44:8) because the Lord is “the first and the last” (44:6).<sup>3</sup> Here in Revelation, this title refers to Jesus' eternal existence. He is the One who creates and consummates history. He is timeless. He is the last chapter. We know time does not end with suffering. It ends with Him. This reality would have encouraged the church in Smyrna to bear up under suffering.

Jesus also states that He is the One “**who was dead, and has come to life.**”<sup>4</sup> This phrase means that Jesus Christ passed into death, through death, and out of death. He triumphed over pain, the cross, the Devil, sin, and death. He is the Conqueror! No matter what might happen to the Smyrna Christians or to us, our Savior has gone through the worst life can bring. He is the One who empathizes with us in our suffering (Heb 2:15-18; 4:15). His words to the church in Smyrna are: “I have faced like you are doing and I have come to life as you will. Death is not the end because of Me.”

**3. The Commendation (2:9).** Smyrna and Philadelphia are the only two churches that receive no criticism or call to repentance.<sup>5</sup> In spite of their trials they had remained pure in belief and behavior.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, suffering was to be their “lot in life.” Not only were they presently suffering; Jesus tells them that they would continue to suffer in the future. In 2:9-10, Jesus addresses four different levels of suffering or persecution.<sup>7</sup> First, He discusses **government persecution**. Jesus says, “**I know your tribulation**” (2:9a). The word “**tribulation**” (*thlipsin*) is a very graphic word. It conveys intense and constant pressure that often leads to death.<sup>8</sup> Jesus was aware that the Christians in Smyrna were literally having the life squeezed out of them by the oppression and restrictions of the government.

The Christian faces the dilemma of having to submit to human authority (Rom 13:1-7; 1 Pet 2:13-17), but not at the expense of disobeying God (Acts 5:29). There is a constant tension between those two relationships. Christians are asked to submit to unbelieving authorities, but not to obey that which violates the clearly revealed will of God.

Second, Christ addresses **economic persecution**. Christ goes on to state **“I know your poverty (but you are rich).”** Materially, the Christians in Smyrna were destitute, probably because they insisted on worshipping Christ. Evidently their persecutors were cutting off some of their incomes or making it hard for them to find jobs.

Now some of today’s television preachers would have us believe that these Christians were out of God’s will. They were living beneath their privileges. All they had to do was “name it and claim it.” Or as some have said, “God wants Christians wealthy but many lack the faith to believe God for it.” This is a terribly heretical doctrine. It grieves me that so many Christians fall for such grossly selfish teaching. The church in Smyrna was suffering because they were in the will of God. Financial prosperity is not God’s will for everyone. Sometimes it costs to be a Christian. It may even cost you financially.<sup>9</sup>

Notwithstanding their physical poverty, the Christians in Smyrna were rich spiritually: positionally (Eph 1:3f.) and practically (1 Pet 3:14-17; 4:13-14).<sup>10</sup> Like the church in India—poor on the outside but rich in spiritual things. As Mother Teresa used to say, “There are different kinds of poverty.” What she meant by this statement is poverty of heart or spirit is far worse than poverty of the pocket book.

Economic persecution can and will happen today. It’s possible that you could lose your job because your faith will not allow you to lie, cheat, or manipulate. Yet we must always remember this important principle: persecution has never been fatal to Christianity but prosperity often has.

Third, Jesus examines **religious persecution**. The Lord also says that He knows **“the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.”** The word **“blasphemy”** means slander or speaking against. The slander that the Smyrna Christians were enduring came from unsaved Jews<sup>11</sup> who were particularly antagonistic toward Christians.<sup>12</sup> In the local situation this may refer to a particular incident for which we lack historical confirmation. We do know from the book of Acts that the Jews began persecuting the Christian community right from the very beginning. This word occurs several times in Acts to refer to the Jewish slanders against Paul and the Gospel he preached (Acts 13:45; 18:6). So enraged were the Jewish leaders against the Gospel, they often tried to stir up opposition among the Gentiles, specifically inciting the Roman authorities to use their civil authority to persecute Christians (Acts 13:50; 14:2-7; 17:5-9).<sup>13</sup> They would create a mob of Gentiles and have the Christians dragged before the civil magistrate on the charge that these Christians were political enemies of Caesar, since they confessed that Jesus alone is Lord.<sup>14</sup>

This type of hostile treatment leads Jesus to call these people **“a synagogue of Satan.”**<sup>15</sup> When we were children most of our mothers told us not to call names. In recent years, the academy, the media, and the church have taken our mothers’ places by urging us to always be polite and politically correct in the language we use.<sup>16</sup> Yet the Bible is far from politically correct. Jesus was very forthright when He dealt with false teachers. In this case, He calls this sect **“a gathering of Satan”!**<sup>17</sup>

We should also note that elsewhere in Revelation the term **“blasphemy”** is only used of slander against God (Rev 13:1, 5, 6; 17:3). This reminds us that slander against man and God is closely connected. Slandering the people of God is a form of slandering God.<sup>18</sup> We had best think twice about slandering a fellow believer in Christ. You know how you feel when someone says something negative about your kids, right? Well, imagine how God feels when someone is critical of one of His kids.

In a recent article on the suffering church, *FaithWorks* listed the degrees of persecution one could face for practice of religious faith<sup>19</sup>:

1. Disapproval
2. Ridicule
3. Pressure to conform
4. Loss of educational opportunities
5. Economic sanctions
6. Shunning
7. Alienation from community
8. Loss of employment
9. Loss of property
10. Physical abuse
11. Mob violence
12. Harassment by officials
13. Kidnapping
14. Forced labor
15. Imprisonment
16. Physical torture
17. Murder or execution

**4. The Challenge (2:10-11).** Fourth, Jesus tackles **physical persecution**. In 2:10, Jesus says, **“Do not fear what you are about to suffer.”** **“Do not fear”** is literally “fear nothing” (Luke 12:4; 1 Pet 3:14).<sup>20</sup> Elsewhere Jesus says, “And do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt 10:28; cf. Ps 46:1-3). God doesn’t want us to fear people or persecution—He wants us to fear Him! Fear can be a debilitating sin! Just as procrastination is the thief of time, so fear is the thief of peace. Therefore, the church in Smyrna could cast their burden on the Lord. So should we! I don’t know what worries and stresses you are carrying today but God would have you give them up to Him (Isa 41:10; Phil 4:6-8; 1 Pet 5:7). If you have not suffered as of yet, cheer up...you will! 2 Timothy 3:12 says, “Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (cf. John 15:18-20). So if you’re not experiencing severe persecution, you are to do three things: (1) thank God for your religious freedom, (2) recognize that it is abnormal for followers of Christ, and (3) make the most of today. Memorize Scripture and spiritually prepare for the time when we will face persecution for our faith.

Jesus continues His theme of suffering with the following words: **“Behold,<sup>21</sup> 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.”** This persecution is attributed to the Devil. It is a continuation of the Serpent’s battle with the Lord Jesus Christ and those who belong to Him (Gen 3:15; John 15:18-21). Human means and men are those we see persecuting the church of Jesus Christ, but invariably, behind the scenes is the old archenemy, the prince of the power of the air. But never fear, the binder of believers in prison shall be bound, he is a defeated foe (Rev. 20:1-3; Rom. 16:20; Col. 2:15; Heb. 2:14-15). The Devil would incite their foes to imprison some of them shortly having received permission from God to do so (cf. Job 1). This would be a trial (Gk. *peirasthete*) that Satan would use to try to entice them to depart from the Lord. Satan’s desire is that you renounce your faith in Christ. He will go to any lengths to accomplish this goal. It was Satan’s first sin and he has been leading people to commit that sin for countless years.

In this context, Satan will cast believers into prison for ten days. Roman prisons were ghastly places. Unlike today’s prisons where you have a private room, work on a college degree, and be fed three meals a day, nobody wanted to check into a Roman prison cell. In most prisons, you are either put to death or slapped around and thrown back on the street. Either way, you don’t stay in those prisons very long.<sup>22</sup>

John probably intended us to interpret this period as 10 literal 24-hour days that lay in the near future of the original recipients of this letter.<sup>23</sup> There is nothing in the text that provides a clue that we should take this number in a figurative sense.<sup>24</sup> However, it would seem that the emphasis falls on the fact that the Lord limits the testing. Just as Satan was given permission to test Job, within limits (Job 1-2), so Satan is allowed to test the saints of Smyrna, but for a specific period of time (whatever the length may be).

### **Principles from 2:9-10:**

- God is in complete control of your circumstances. He always knows what's happening. Yet, He does refrain from intervening in certain circumstances<sup>25</sup> because He has a purpose in tribulation, poverty, and slander that comes against Christians (see Matt 5:11-12; Rom 5:3-5; Jas 1:2-4; 1 Pet 1:6-7). God uses trials to fine-tune your character for His glory. He uses trials either as a barbell (to steadily strengthen) or a blowtorch (to burn away). They are for your profit! When you face trials and problems is your immediate response a plea for instant relief? Or is your overriding realization a recognition that God has sovereignly designed these circumstances as a means to deepen your relationship with Him.
- God views human weakness as strength. It is sad that the three strengths that Jesus refers to (tribulation, poverty, and slander) are considered weaknesses in the American church. This is because the church today has forgotten the centrality of "the fellowship of Christ's sufferings" (Phil 3:10) for the early church. Suffering for Christ was a privilege, not just a sorrow. It was certainly "painful" (Heb 12:11) but was also considered a participation with Christ, at a deeper level.<sup>26</sup>
- God sets a limit on what Satan can do to believers (1 Cor 10:13). Although your trials may seem severe at the time, know that God's grace is sufficient to carry you through any trial (2 Cor 12:9).
- "The greatest criticism of the American church today is that no one wants to persecute it: because there is nothing very much to persecute it about."<sup>27</sup>

Jesus' primary exhortation is found in the final phrase of 2:10: **"Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life."** Verse 10 closes with a command and an attached promise. Jesus commands us to be **"faithful until death."** The emphasis is upon the word **"faithful."** Jesus is saying, "I do not require you to be successful; I require you to be faithful" (Jas 1:12). Is your life characterized by faithfulness? Or do you lack perseverance? Paul writes in 2 Tim 1:7 that "God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline." You and I have "discipline" within us. We can exercise faithfulness if we simply appropriate it.

Jesus goes on to say that we must exercise this supernatural faithfulness **"until death."** This means there is no end to our faithfulness to Christ. We are to exercise it until we die. We can't go too far. We can't give too much. This mentality ensures that you will experience abundant life. It has been well said, "A person is not prepared to live until he is prepared to die." Are you ready to die for Christ? If He privileged you to suffer to that extent, would you be willing?

The crown of life appears to be a victor's crown (Gk. *stephanos*), given for enduring the trials and tests of life, even to the point of death, without denying Christ.<sup>28</sup> Please note that this is not a promise of life but the crown of life. Life is not a reward for faithfulness. Life is a gift of grace.<sup>29</sup> The crown is a special reward for endurance under persecution. Jesus is speaking of reward, not salvation! The person who endures trials will receive the crown of life after Jesus Christ has approved him or her.<sup>30</sup>

As He does in each of the seven letters, Jesus exhorts the individual believer (“**he,**” “**him**”) to hear and heed His words, given by the Spirit. He then says, “**He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death**” (2:11).<sup>31</sup> The verb “**overcomes**” is derived from a Greek word *nikao*, which means to be victorious or to win. This term was used with a legal nuance, meaning to win a case. It was employed in the field of athletics, meaning to win a contest. It was used in a military sense, meaning to win a war. In the New Testament this word is almost always employed in a context of spiritual conflict.

A faithful Christian who overcomes “**will not be hurt by the second death.**” There is a double negative in Greek (*ou me*), which can be translated, “no way,” “never”!<sup>32</sup> It is the strongest way to negate something in Greek. This expression is a figure of speech “litotes” (pronounced, lie'-tuh-tease'). Litotes is a way of stating a positive by an emphatic negative. It is a deliberate understatement. For example, if someone says to me, “His request presented me with no small problem,” I know exactly what he means. The person who made the request of him had presented him a BIG problem! In the phrase “no small problem” we have a very common figure of speech. The phrase “no small problem” negates the opposite idea. The person is saying, “The problem is very large.”<sup>33</sup> Two great biblical examples demonstrate this figure of speech. When Paul says, “I am not ashamed of the Gospel...” (Rom 1:16), we immediately recognize that he is in reality quite proud of the Gospel because of what it can do. In Heb 6:10, the Hebrew writes states, “God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown...” This means God’s character guarantees He will remember.

The same idea is operating in Rev 2:11. Since the “**second death**” is explained later to be “the lake of fire” (Rev 20:14), we can be clear about what is being promised. The overcomer will in no way be hurt by the second death. He will not even appear at the great white throne judgment because he will have been raised before the thousand years and be ruling and reigning with the Messiah. Instead of the second death, the overcomer will be “crowned” with the enjoyment of life “more abundant” (see John 10:10). That is to say, this conquering Christian is as far above the experience-level of eternal death as it is possible to be. In a masterly understatement, the Lord Jesus says in effect: “The first death may “hurt” you briefly, the second not at all! I like this principle: death may alarm us, but it cannot harm us.

But perhaps there is something else here. The word “**hurt**” (*adikethe*) means “to injure, to hurt, or do harm” (cf. Rev 6:6; 7:2-3; 9:4, 10, 19; 11:5). It may also be used in a broader sense of “do wrong” (cf. Rev 22:11). Therefore, it seems that there is a way in which an unfaithful believer can be hurt by the second death. Unbelievers who persecute believers and who seek to get them to recant or renounce their faith in Christ are, in some ways, the personification of the second death and are not only acting out of their spiritual death against the believer, but are themselves, headed for the second death. So when a believer fails to overcome the trial and recants because of the pain of the persecution, he is hurt by the second death because he will have lost his reward (2:11). The lesson is this: Don’t let sinners, on their way to the second death, be responsible for causing you to lose your reward. Don’t let people going to hell keep you from enjoying maximum blessing in heaven. If you can endure everything sinners throw at you and remain faithful to Christ, your reward is great. You are storing up crowns. I like what Tony Evans says, “When I find out people hate me because I’m committed to Jesus Christ, I say, ‘Praise God, give me another crown.’”

What if I told you that you only had the rest of this year to live? How would your life change? What would your priorities be? Would they need to radically change?

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The Greek word *smyrna* translates the Hebrew word for myrrh. Myrrh was a fragrant spice used to make perfume, which was used in embalming dead bodies (cf. Matt 2:11; John 19:39). Myrrh becomes very fragrant when someone crushes it. For many of us, it is only when we are crushed and broken that we give off the aroma of Christ (2 Cor 2:14-16).

<sup>2</sup> This title is only used of Christ in Revelation (1:17; 2:8; 22:13). However, it is connected with God the Father (the Alpha and Omega) in 1:8; 21:6; and 22:13.

<sup>3</sup> Several chapters later in Isaiah, the Lord repeats this argument and reminds Israel that she need not be afraid of man or of the accuser, that old Serpent (Isa 50:8-9; 51:7-9). Thus, the first and the last is Jesus Christ Himself. It is He who crushed Rahab, who pierced the Dragon. Paul quotes this passage from Isaiah in Romans 8:33-34, to remind us that our Advocate is the risen Lord Jesus who pleads our case before the divine tribunal.

<sup>4</sup> A literal Greek rendering would be: "He came to be dead and began to live or came to life again." This is an obvious reference to the cross and the resurrection.

<sup>5</sup> It is probably not safe to say that the church at Smyrna was free from faults. It is more likely that the faults they did have were not critical. This persecuted church was in need of encouragement, not rebuke.

<sup>6</sup> "Churches 1 and 7 are in grave danger; churches 2 and 6 are in excellent shape, churches 3, 4, and 5 are middling, neither very good nor very bad." Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John: TNTC* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 58.

<sup>7</sup> I have adopted four of the five different levels described in Steven J. Lawson, *Final Call* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994), 97-106.

<sup>8</sup> Literally, it means to crush an object in a vise grip by tightening the screws. It pictures crushing a victim and squeezing out his life's blood. In Classical Greek, it was used of one who was mashed to death by an enormous boulder.

<sup>9</sup> See also Lawson, *Final Call*, 100.

<sup>10</sup> The opposite was true of the church of Laodicea (see Rev 3:17-18; see also Matt 6:19-21; 19:21; Luke 6:20; 12:21; 2 Cor 6:10; 1 Tim 6:17; Jas 2:5).

<sup>11</sup> Evidently some of the persecutors were Jews who slandered the Christians (cf. Acts 18:12-17) and cursed Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 26:11). They apparently claimed to be committed to God but were not. They came out of Satan's camp (cf. Acts 14:19; 17:5-8, 13).

<sup>12</sup> The persecution of Christians by Jews of physical descent is well known in the New Testament (cf. Acts 13:50; 14:2, 5, 19; 17:5; 26:2; 1 Thess 2:14-15).

<sup>13</sup> Why were the Jews so enraged against the Gospel? One reason the Jews were opposed to the Christians was because they allowed Gentiles to become a part of the church. In the early stages of the historical development of Christianity, the majority of Christians were of Jewish heritage. Thus Christianity was viewed at first as a sect of Judaism. Yet, Gentiles quickly began to be added to the church. As Gentiles believed in Jesus they were then considered to be equal members of the church. Non-Christian Jews could not tolerate this. They could not allow Gentiles to be considered a part of Judaism. Judaism had to be kept pure from Gentile influence.

<sup>14</sup> In 1 Thess 2:16 Paul complains that the Jews continually tried to hinder him from preaching to the Gentiles that they might be saved.

<sup>15</sup> In Numbers 16:3, Israel was called the congregation of the Lord, but here Christ calls these unbelieving Jews, the congregation of Satan (cf. John 8:33 with 8:44).

<sup>16</sup> J. Ramsey Michaels, *Revelation: IVPNTC* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 73.

<sup>17</sup> *Satan* is a Hebrew word that means "adversary or accuser." Its first occurrence as a proper name for the Devil occurs in 1 Chron 21:1. Notice in that text "Satan stood up against Israel and moved David to number Israel." The very first occurrence of "Satan" in the OT is a text in which the enemy is standing up in the heavenly court, as it were, against Israel, against the people of God. That is Satan's fundamental character - he is the one who stands up and attacks God's people. He attacked Job and accused him of having a faith founded on earthly prosperity rather than a hope in the heavenly reward (Job 1:6-12; 2:1-6). He stood at the right hand of Joshua the priest, who was clothed in filthy garments, to accuse him before God (Zech 3:1). Thus, later in Revelation, the heavenly choir calls Satan, "the accuser of the brethren" (Rev 12:9-10).

<sup>18</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation: ECNT* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 131.

<sup>19</sup> Preaching Today Citation: Andrew Black and Craig Bird, "The Risk of Faith," *FaithWorks* (July/August 1999), 17-20; source: Robert Garret, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

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<sup>20</sup> In Revelation, whenever the word “fear” (*phobou*) is used of the saints, it refers to reverence for God (e.g., 11:8; 14:7; 15:4; 19:5). In the midst of terrible tribulation, God’s people are called to “fearless” witness (1:2. 9; 6:9; 12:11, 17; 20:4) accompanied by “perseverance” (1:9; 2:2. 3, 19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12) and “faith” (2:10, 13, 19; 13:10; 14:12; 17:14). See Osborne, *Revelation*, 132.

<sup>21</sup> “Behold,” (*idou*) signals an oracular declaration (cf. Rev 2:22; 3:8, 9, 20).

<sup>22</sup> Lawson, *Final Call*, 103.

<sup>23</sup> Three other views are held by commentators: (1) ten major Roman persecutions for the first 250 years of the church, (2) a ten year persecution through the Emperor Diocletian, (3) and ten years as a symbolic period of time.

<sup>24</sup> Such limited times of persecution are well known in biblical history (Gen 7:4; 40:12, 13, 20; Num 14:33; Esth 3:13; Ezek 4:1-8; Matt 12:40). Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John* (London: Macmillan, 1906), 32.

<sup>25</sup> G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Revelation: the New Century Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 81.

<sup>26</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 129.

<sup>27</sup> Preaching Today Citation: George F. MacLeod, *Leadership*, Vol. 2, no. 4.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. 1 Cor 9:25; 1 Thess 2:19; 2 Tim 4:6-8; Heb 2:9; Jas 1:12; 1 Pet 5:4; Rev 4:4.

<sup>29</sup> See also Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 49.

<sup>30</sup> This approval will take place when the Lord evaluates that believer’s works at the judgment seat of Christ (1 Cor 3:13). He will award the crown at this judgment (1 Cor 3:14).

<sup>31</sup> Jesus tells us “the one who continually overcomes (reflecting the present participle) will not be hurt by the second death.”

<sup>32</sup> Gk. *ou me* is used 16 times in Revelation and is nearly always used with emphatic force (Rev 2:11; 3:3, 5, 12; 9:6; 15:4; 18:7, 14, 21, 22 [3x’s], 23 [2x’s]; 21:25, 27).

<sup>33</sup> Americans use litotes all the time in ordinary speech without being aware of it. Some additional examples might be: “You won’t go unrewarded” = “You’ll be repaid”; “That suit is no bargain” = “It’s expensive”; “The quiz wasn’t any snap” = “It was tough”; “He sure isn’t Santa Claus” = “He’s a Scrooge.” “Retailers are not saints” = “They’ll cheat you”; “Theologians are not given to simple language” = “They’re hard to follow.” See Zane Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege* (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 1992), 139. Note: all of these examples are not Hodges’.