

## Revelation 2:8-11

Do you remember the three gifts brought by the wise men in their visit to the baby Jesus?  
Gold, frankincense, and myrrh

Well, the church that is the subject of today's letter is Smyrna. The city derived its name from the spice that was valuable and useful, especially for embalming. Given the content of the letter to that church, the name Smyrna was appropriate.

Smyrna = Izmir Turkey, only city that survives; rival of Ephesus, high culture, birthplace of Homer, coins from the 1<sup>st</sup> century say "first of Asia in beauty and size". Izmir was where American EPC pastor Andrew Brunson was arrested and held for 2 years.

Smyrna was known as an ally of Rome and built a temple to the goddess Roma in 195 BC. Two other temples to pagan gods. The buildings and hills around the harbor create the "crown of Smyrna."

These churches of chapters 2-3 were 30-40 years old.

We at Highlands are close to 30 years old, so we can learn from these letters. The question for us is,  
"What does Jesus want to see in the church?"

### LETTERS TO THE CHURCHES

As with all the letters and the entire book, God is reminding them of a much bigger picture.

Richard Bauckham: **We have suggested that one of the functions of Revelation was to purge and to refurbish the Christian imagination** (i.e. to help us see things as they truly are)

EX: THE MAGIC EYE – computer generated graphic designs that have a surface image and then a deeper background image, if you can focus correctly. THAT'S WHAT Revelation is – the deeper background reality of the world, but we need the eyes and ears of faith to see it.

The world has a way of squeezing us into its mold through its images and vain ideologies, so Paul warned in Romans 12:

**2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.**

One of the functions of Revelation is to give the believers a picture of what is really going on and who has the final victory – Christ, the Lamb who was slain.

The message of scripture is "This world is not all there is."

The description of the church's situation is prefaced in each letter by the words, "I know."

Jesus is not an absentee landlord or king. He is there walking among the lampstands. HE KNOWS their situations, their deeds, their hearts, JUST AS HE KNOWS YOURS and mine

\*\* If Jesus were to write you a letter, what would it say after, "I know your deeds...?"

EACH LETTER HAS A PROMISE TO THE ONE WHO CONQUERS.

Ephesus: **To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.'**

To Smyrna...

**11b:He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.'**

QUESTION: Have you ever thought about how you would respond to the threat of death unless you renounce Christ? A lot of believers face that today. The churches addressed in these letters faced that as well.

8 **"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:**

9 '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. 10 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. 11 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.'

Today we'll consider **the tale of two Bishops... Polycarp and Spong** (sounds like a creepy lawfirm)

This is not a letter of rebuke, but of empathy and encouragement. It is a letter to give them strength to face the test that is coming. The test is a tribulation that could result in death. Death of believers in this church will play out in a significant way later in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century as the Bishop Polycarp is killed. He was one of the key voices of the early church and was a disciple of John.

<https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/study/module/polycarp/>

Three days before he was arrested, while he was praying, he had a vision of the pillow under his head in flames. He said prophetically to those who were with him, "I will be burnt alive."

As Polycarp was being taken into the arena, a voice came to him from heaven: "*Be strong, Polycarp and play the man!*"

No one saw who had spoken, but our brothers who were there heard the voice. When the crowd heard that Polycarp had been captured, there was an uproar. The Proconsul asked him whether he was Polycarp. On hearing that he was, he tried to persuade him to apostatize, saying, "Have respect for your old age, swear by the fortune of Caesar. Repent, and say, 'Down with the Atheists!'" Polycarp looked grimly at the wicked heathen multitude in the stadium, and gesturing towards them, he said, "Down with the Atheists!" "Swear," urged the Proconsul, "reproach Christ, and I will set you free." "**86 years have I have served him,**" Polycarp declared, "**and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?**"

"I have wild animals here," the Proconsul said. "I will throw you to them if you do not repent." "Call them," Polycarp replied. "It is unthinkable for me to repent from what is good to turn to what is evil. I will be glad though to be changed from evil to righteousness."

"If you despise the animals, I will have you burned." "**You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour, and is then extinguished, but you know nothing of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. Why are you waiting? Bring on whatever you want.**"

Ready to be an acceptable burnt-offering to God, he looked up to heaven, and said,

"O Lord God Almighty, the Father of your beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, by whom we have received the knowledge of you, the God of angels, powers and every creature, and of all the righteous who live before you, I give you thanks that you count me worthy to be numbered among your martyrs, sharing the cup of Christ and the resurrection to eternal life, both of soul and body, through the immortality of the Holy Spirit. May I be received this day as an acceptable sacrifice, as you, the true God, have predestined, revealed to me, and now fulfilled. I praise you for all these things, I bless you and glorify you, along with the everlasting Jesus Christ, your beloved Son. To you, with him, through the Holy Ghost, be glory both now and forever. Amen."

In this letter to Smyrna, Jesus says, "**10 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... 11 .... He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death**

Matt 10:28 And do not be afraid of 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.

There is an eternal reality and judgement that surpasses physical death, so live in light of that eternal reality. We can take heart in knowing that all of our trials and tribulations pass through the nail-scarred hands of Christ.

These words of encouragement seem so far removed from our reality in the 'Christian west' for the past 1500 years, but the original audience needed to hear them. Believers around the world, then and today, have needed to hear them. **This eternal perspective of Christ as ruler of all the kings of the earth is needed to resist the absolutizing and totalitarian power structures of the world (Bauckham Theol of Rev p. 160-161).**

Lord Acton is known for this statement, "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." In saying this, He is channeling the warning of Revelation, whether he meant to or not.

We need to read Revelation with open ears so that we can know what counter-cultural living means for us today as we seek to resist the constant squeeze of the world. The word 'tribulation' v. 10 refers to "pressure, burden, persecution". These are not the ordinary interruptions of daily life, but typically the pressure that comes from standing for the values of the kingdom of Christ.

When it comes to living counter-culturally, Jesus knows where of he speaks. He was counter-culture to both the Jews and the Romans, and he died as a result. But as first born from the dead, He is able to encourage the church at Smyrna (and Lafayette)

**The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this: 9 '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. 10 Do not fear what you are about to suffer.... Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life**

v. 8 Jesus was dead and has come to life. He is qualified to speak to those who may face death as he gives the promise the crown of life to those who are faithful unto death.

**"It is a pity that saints should be so fond of life as they often are: they ought to be always on good terms with death." Thomas Boston, Human Nature in its Fourfold State**

JESUS WAS FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH – That was the mark of his love for us and of His humble obedience to the Father – Phil 2 The Christian view of suffering always begins with the cross. Christ suffered so we should not be surprised when we also suffer for following Him. Jesus says that we are blessed to suffer in his name. Polycarp certainly believed it.

v. 9 What is going on with these 'synagogues of Satan?'

D. Johnson: ...We suspect these opponents are *physical* descendants of Israel who have rejected their Messiah (Jesus) and thus forfeited their claim to Israel's covenantal identity. Such synagogues, capitalizing on their standing in Judaism (and recognition by Roman authorities), slander those who follow Jesus. In fact, Jesus had predicted that his followers would be expelled from synagogues (John 16:2-4); and that is what happened (Acts 13:44-45; 18:12-13).

The Jewish community was well entrenched in Smyrna, while the church was fairly new (Koester p. 274. There was probably a mixture of gentile and Jewish background believers in the church which may have created some of the tension with the other Jews.)

This letter is revealed by a Jew to a Jew – Jesus to John, so it is not hate speech, nor should be used to justify Christian acts of violence against Jews. It does however manifest some of the early pressure that the ethnic Jews were putting on the Christians. The book of Acts is full of this conflict.

The church in Smyrna is called poor, but rich. Poor in terms of material wealth, but rich in faith. They likely suffered economic hardship because of their faith – you could be denied jobs for not engaging in the required worship of the State or the state sponsored gods.

The Jews were engaged in blasphemy against Christ by their mistreatment of the church. At this time, Rome didn't usually initiate action against Christians but responded to accusations or concerns voiced by others. (Koester p. 280) The text doesn't spell out the concerns, but history indicates that the Christians were accused of:

-cannibalism (“eat my flesh, drink my blood and you will have eternal life Jn 6”),  
-immorality (kissing among ‘brothers and sisters’),  
-destruction of the family (“he who loves his mother and father more than me...”),  
-atheism (Rome had many gods, temples, statues, Christians had none),  
-disloyal troublemakers (enemies of the State because they didn’t bow the knee to Caesar Acts 17 – “another king, Jesus”))

We read in a number of places in Paul’s letters of a similar distinction between true and false Judaism, the true and false sons of Israel, or Israel after the flesh and Israel after the spirit. This is another entire sermon, but what is said here is seen throughout the OT and NT. Genetics and ethnicity are NOT the keys to being a true ‘son of Israel’. The real issue is faith in God and His promises revealed in the Messiah.

v. 10 Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life

This crown of life is in contrast to the ‘crown of Smyrna’...

The city itself began at the harbor and traversed the narrow foothills. Behind the city rose a hill covered with temples and noble buildings which encircled a hill named the Pagos, but the hill was also called the “the Crown of Smyrna” because of the way the buildings formed a crown around the hill.

The crown of Smyrna disappeared as the city changed over the years. The crown of life is eternal. The laurel wreaths or crowns awarded to the victors in competition would fade, but the crown awarded to the faithful was eternal, even if they were killed.

The world is always ready to celebrate or give 15 minutes of fame i.e. a laurel wreath, to those who embrace its distorted and broken values. Often people who sign on to the current message of culture are acclaimed or applauded for their ‘courage’ by the cultural elites. REAL COURAGE is standing firm for God’s kingdom values in the face of the cultural thought police. Sadly, we are all too often sucked into the race for the crown or smile of the world.

**VOV THE SAVIOUR...**

May thy dear Son preserve me from this present evil world,  
so that its smiles never allure,  
nor its frowns terrify,  
nor its vices defile,  
nor its errors delude me

v. 11 Rayburn: The death of the body in this world is the first death; the existence of the soul in a condition of alienation from God and suffering his judgment in the world to come is the second death. **Death in the Bible is never extinction, never the end of a person’s existence; it is always a condition of that existence. Life and death are the two ways of existing as a human being.**

**THE SECOND BISHOP of our story: John Shelby Spong, the anti-Polycarp.**

Believers, then and now, could expect opposition to come from outside the church, and 2:9 refers to the synagogues of Satan who blaspheme Christ and his truth. I want to point out the danger of opposition from within the visible church.

Last Sunday (9/12/21) we got news of the death of Episcopalian Bishop John Shelby Spong. He was the Bishop of the diocese of Newark from 1979-2000. He was noted for his own very unorthodox (progressive views). The thing that made John Shelby Spong so famous, or infamous, was the fact that he basically abandoned every major tenet of biblical Christianity. He sought a complete theological reformulation of Christianity itself.

FOR EXAMPLE:As for the proclamation of the resurrection, The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, Spong offered this thesis. (2015)

<https://progressivechristianity.org/resources/charting-the-new-reformation-part-iii-the-twelve-theses/>

The Easter event transformed the Christian movement, but that does not mean that it was the physical resuscitation of Jesus' deceased body back into human history. The earliest biblical records state that "God raised him." Into what, we need to ask. The experience of resurrection must be separated from its later mythological explanations.

Whereas Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna, was faithful unto death, Bishop Spong wasn't faithful at all.

In a December 2015 article for 'progressive Christianity ...

Can a new Christianity for a new world be forged on the basis of these Twelve Theses? Can a living, vital and real faith that is true to the experience of the past, while dismissing the explanations of the past, be born anew in this generation? ... I issue this call to the Christian world to transform its holy words of yesterday into believable words of today. If we fail in this task there is little reason to think that Christianity, as presently understood and constituted, will survive this century.

I invite you, my audience, including academics, scholars, pastors, faithful and disillusioned people alike in the pews and even those who have long ago given up any religious commitments to take up citizenship in "The Secular City," to join in this journey and to engage this debate.

Not the words of a faithful witness, but at least there was a Dec 2015 OFFER \$25 Holiday Gift subscription to Bishop Spong's Weekly Newsletter....(P. T. Barnum was right..."there's a sucker born every minute")

**Bishop Polycarp or Bishop Spong?**

Who had an ear to hear what the Spirit said to the churches?

Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. 11 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.'

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