



PERSECUTED IN SMYRNA: FAITHFUL NO MATTER WHAT

Part 4 of The Seven

Pastor Mark Driscoll | Revelation 2:8–11 | May 06, 2012

Revelation 2:8–11

⁸ “And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.

⁹ “‘I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰ Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto 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. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.’”

THE CITY OF SMYRNA

Hi, Pastor Mark here in Izmir, Turkey, a city of some 4 or 4.5 million people. A city that is famous in the Bible because a letter was actually sent to the church in this city from the mouth of the Lord Jesus, through the pen of his servant, John. We read that early in the book of Revelation. And in that day this was actually called Smyrna.

So when this letter was written from Jesus, through John, to the church at Smyrna, this was a city of about sixty to one hundred thousand people. Christianity had been established there in its infancy form. There was a church or a collection of small churches that were meeting. And they were undergoing persecution and suffering. This is during the reign of the Emperor Domitian, and he was systematically persecuting and murdering Christians.

And so John has a number of letters to deliver from Jesus, to seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3. And the letter that he delivers to the church here at Smyrna includes only encouragements, no criticisms. This was a very faithful church that adhered to the Scriptures and adored the Lord Jesus.

The name of the city, Smyrna, has a few different meanings. Its Hittite meaning was “city of the mother goddess.” This was a city known for the pagan worship of a female deity, who was actually a very powerful demon. The Greek version of the city means “the city of myrrh.” And if you’ll remember back to the days of Jesus, surrounding his birth, particularly in Matthew’s gospel, it says that there were wise men who came from the East, and they brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And so the Greek rendering of this city is it is the city of myrrh.

Myrrh was a curious gift to give to a baby because it was not only a perfume but an embalming fluid for those who were dead. It typified both death and pleasant sweetness. And though that is perplexing, it was fitting for the life of Jesus, as his death was both pleasing and satisfying of the wrath of God.

And it was also appropriate for this city because, though they were suffering, and though they were persecuted, and though they were dying, their faithful service imitated, emulated the life of Jesus. And also they would have been considered by God a sweet fragrance, a sacrificed life, that was pleasing in his sight because of their unyielding devotion to him.

POLYCARP

Perhaps this is all typified in one particular citizen of this city’s life. He is a man who was legendary. And he is a man for whom we have much to thank. His name, and I’ll give you the details, was Polycarp. Polycarp was a church father trained by John, in so far as we can ascertain, the same John who was the youngest and beloved disciple of Jesus. The same John who wrote 1, 2, 3 John, the Gospel of John, and Revelation; he lived to be about one hundred years of age and is buried roughly an hour’s drive from here, outside of the ancient city of Ephesus.

John trained Polycarp and sent Polycarp to this city of ancient Smyrna, modern-day Izmir, and he was presumably the bishop overseeing all of the pastors and leaders in this particular area. And he was part of a tour group that went to represent Christianity in Rome. And while he was away from this city and his people and place, he was essentially arrested, falsely tried, and he was sentenced to death because he was unwilling to worship the Roman Emperor Domitian, who had declared himself to be lord, god, and savior. Polycarp would not deny Jesus, and he confessed that Jesus alone was Lord, God, and Savior.

So when they brought Polycarp, the pastor and bishop from this church, to his place of execution, they asked him if he wanted to renounce his faith and deny Jesus, thereby sparing his own life. And here’s what he had to say as they were preparing to burn him at the stake. He said, quote, “For eighty-six years I have served Christ and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my king, who saved me?”

Polycarp, right to the end, like Jesus, suffered nobly, humbly, righteously. And the news came back to this town, that, in fact, their pastor, their beloved leader, their theologian, the man who had led many people to Christ, and baptized them, and disciplined them, and officiated their weddings, and tenderly cared for them, that he had been brutally murdered and died a martyr's death. This city remained a place where Christianity flourished, where the people of God remained devout and steadfast in the face of suffering, following the example of Jesus, following the example of their great leader, Polycarp.

A FAITHFUL REMNANT

Today what we find is, a few thousand years later, there is only a faithful remnant of Christianity that remains. Modern-day Turkey is a place to or from which two-thirds of the New Testament can be traced. And it is a city today that bridges Europe and the Middle East. It is a cosmopolitan nation. And it is a nation that is post-Christian. Of the 74 million people here, only roughly 3,500 Turks are evangelical Christians. In cities like Izmir, Smyrna, where we are at present, out of the 4 million people, only hundreds are, in fact, Christians.

There are only two churches in this city that have more than one hundred people. One of them is the Lighthouse Church. It is a church that was founded some sixteen or seventeen years ago by the New Frontiers Network, which is a wonderful network of churches that we love, and appreciate, and work with around the world. And the Lighthouse Church is just over my shoulder. It meets in the Anglican church building just behind me.

Today I have one of the great privileges and joys of my life, preaching to the church at Smyrna on John's letter to the church at Smyrna, in the Bible. So we're very pleased to have you join us. And we'll transition down for this church service. You'll get to hear what Jesus had to say through his servant John, in the book of Revelation, to the church at Smyrna. How it remains absolutely applicable today. And you'll get to see Christians worshiping Jesus in this place, including many of whom are converted Turks, and God is beginning to stir in this city people who are coming to Jesus. And we're grateful to join them in worship today, and to share them with you.

CHURCH SERVICE IN SMYRNA

Good to see you, buddy. Come here a minute. Good to see you, bro.

Young Man: I pray in Turkish, yeah? Lord, I want to bless Pastor Mark, Jesus. Lord, I want you to bless him, Lord, and I want you to anoint him, Lord. And Lord, I want you to speak to your people, Lord, your congregation, through his message. Lord, please be with us, Lord. And speak to your people, Lord. Lord, let your words, Lord, dwell in our hearts. Lord, thank you so much for Pastor Mark, Lord, bless him. In your holy name, and I bless the church, amen.

Amen, thank you brother. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you to the leaders for allowing me to join you. And thank you Betsy for translating.

This is my third time to your nation and I am learning a tremendous amount. And with this opportunity to preach, of course, I will be in Revelation 2:8-11. It may be a familiar text of Scripture for you, but I hope that God has something fresh for you today. And as an American boy there is nothing cooler than preaching to the church at Smyrna, about the church at Smyrna.

JESUS IS WATCHING THE CHURCH

As I've been in your country I've noticed that you love television. Is that true? Every home and apartment has two television satellite dishes. It seems to me that there are twice as many televisions as Turks. And every time you watch television I want you to think of this: According to Revelation 2 and 3, Jesus watches seven channels. And one of his favorite channels is Smyrna, or Izmir.

Two thousand years ago Jesus spoke to the church in Smyrna through John. And he told them that he was watching them and paying careful attention to their life. And the Bible says that God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. And what is Jesus watching right now from his throne in heaven as Lord? He is watching the church in Smyrna. And so today we will be looking at his words to you.

And as you know, Jesus had seven letters to seven churches and yours is one of the only cities that still has a Christian church. There is nowhere on earth that has had a legacy of faithful Christianity longer than you. And on behalf of your brothers and sisters in the United States, we say, "Thank you."

JESUS' WORDS TO THE CHURCH IN SMYRNA

Jesus says in Revelation 2, "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna," or Izmir, "write." Here Jesus is telling us that there is an angel appointed for this city. A powerful spirit being sent to serve. And since angels do not die as humans do that same angel may be appointed to this very church, overseeing your life. This angel has been laboring to preserve faithful Christianity in this city.

Opposing this angel and God, are demons, unclean spirits. And let me say this, this is the darkest place on earth for the gospel of Jesus Christ. The research says that Turkey is the most unchurched nation on the earth. And so this angel is fighting in the heavenlies for the life of this church. And I want you to know that the struggles that you have are spiritual in nature. There is a spiritual battle for the future of the nation of Turkey. And churches like this are essential for the forward progress of the message of Jesus.

I have preached in at least a dozen nations and this is the most difficult place I have ever seen. You may not know that because it seems for you that this is normal. But you are an inspiration to me. And on behalf of Jesus, I say, "Thank you." When I started my church fifteen years ago, it was the least churched city in the United States of America. But there were far more Christians than there are in the entire nation of Turkey.

And being a Christian here, you may be discouraged. And Jesus does not want you to be discouraged. He wants you to be encouraged and hopeful.

And the letter that he gave to the church in this city two thousand years ago is still applicable today. As Jesus gave these seven letters to seven churches, the letter to your church has no rebuke, only encouragement.

I'll now read his words: "The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews," or God's people, "and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death."

ENDURE WHAT HE ENDURED FOR YOU

Here Jesus is asking you to endure what he endured for you. And if you know that Jesus loves you, and you love him, you will be willing to do this, though it is hard. And Jesus says there are five ways that you will be mistreated as he was.

Number one, he says there will be tribulation. This means that it will be harder to live in this city as a Christian.

Number two, there will be poverty. Being a Christian will cost you money. Some of you will lose jobs and inheritances and it will not be repaid until the kingdom of God.

Number three, you will be slandered. Being a Christian means that your reputation might be destroyed. People will say things that are untrue, perhaps, about you, or your church, or your faith. They will misunderstand or misrepresent who you love and what you believe. Is this, in fact, happening? Jesus' words are true. All of Jesus' words are true.

Number four, Jesus says there will be suffering. Being a Christian will make your life far more difficult.

And number five, it could include death. For some in the city's history, such as men like Polycarp, all the way to the present, this has been the price to be paid. We do not aspire to die or to cause any conflict. But we believe the words of the Bible: "To live is Christ and to die is gain." Whatever the price, we belong to the Lord.

And he promises that after death there will be no second death. There will be no hell, condemnation, or wrath. For the Christian, this as close to hell as you will get. For the non-Christian, this is as close to heaven as they will get. Because Jesus died for us and rose for us, if we die for him, we will rise with him.

This is, in fact, true. Some of you have lost family and friends who have rejected you. Some of you have lost jobs and inheritances. Some of you have lost spouses, family members, and friends. And Jesus grieves with you. He experienced the same thing while on the earth. And even as this city has a history of putting Christian leaders in prison, Jesus has experienced that as well. And some of you, perhaps, have even feared for your own life.

DO NOT FEAR

And Jesus says, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit has to say to the churches." Jesus wants to open your ear to hear a word from him today. And his word is very important for you to believe. Jesus says, "Do not fear." Jesus says, "Do not fear."

This is the most common commandment in the entire Bible because this is the most common problem for the Christian. Who are you afraid of? What are you afraid of? That fear will paralyze you. It will cause you not to live courageously and boldly. And Jesus knows that there are reasons for you to be afraid. And he says, "Do not fear."

He does not promise that life will be easy. But he does promise to be with you. He is a God who has experienced tribulation, poverty, slander, suffering, and death. He is always present to comfort you because he has walked the road that you are on. And since he has walked that road for you, inviting you to walk it with him is a great honor.

So, do not fear. They may take your money. They may take your reputation. They may take your life. But they cannot take your Jesus. And if Jesus is who you treasure the most, then the fact that he is always with you and cannot be taken from you is enough. "So, do not fear," Jesus says.

Let me say a few things about fear. Fear turns us into false prophets. It compels us to look into the future to predict only that which is the worst-case scenario, and then to live fearful of it. The truth is, we do not know what the future holds. We should be less concerned about the future and what might happen, and more concerned with just doing what is right, trusting God for our future.

Fear is an opportunity to run to God, or to run from God. Just like when a child is scared, they should run to their parent for protection.

Everyone is afraid of something, or someone, at some time. Fear is not always a sin or a demonstration of a lack of faith. But it can be an opportunity to trust God and to run to him, trusting that he may deliver us, and if not, he will use it to teach us more about the sufferings of Jesus.

So then even evil is used for our good because of God's love, just as Jesus himself was murdered so that we might be loved. God is good. The devil mentioned here is evil. The devil does that which is evil. And God is so powerful, he uses it for our good.

So, do not fear. Do not fear. Hear what the Spirit says to the churches. I believe God wants you to go to multiple services. Do not be afraid. God wants you to plant more churches. Do not be afraid. God wants you to advance the message of Jesus. Do not be afraid.

And in two thousand years from today, wouldn't it be wonderful if there were still a church in Smyrna? A church that loved Jesus. A church that served Jesus. A church that made Jesus famous in Turkey. And from Turkey into Europe and the Middle East.

YOU ARE PART OF GOD'S DIVINE PLAN

Hear what the Spirit says to the churches. God has placed you here today. Do not be afraid. Acts 17 says God determines when we are born and where we will live. You are part of God's divine plan. God has placed you today in this place. Because Turkey matters. Because Izmir matters. Because Jesus matters. And because your life matters.

You have been placed in the most difficult city. Do not be afraid. Know that God must have something wonderful for you. And what a great honor it is to be chosen by God for such a time as this. Especially you young men. The future belongs to the young men, if they will serve Jesus. God would ask you young men to walk in holiness, to study faithfully, to be courageous, and to make this church and city something that you take responsibility for. It is not enough to just be a Christian in this city. You must be a fruitful Christian.

For you young men, this is a magnificent, historic opportunity to marry women who love Jesus. To raise children who love Jesus. To raise grandchildren who love Jesus. And to leave servants of Jesus for generations. The work here will be slow. And it will be hard. But it is possible to see Jesus made much of in Izmir. I pray that your grandsons would be planting churches. And that you would not fear. Jesus loves you. I love you. Thank you for being an encouragement. And do not fear.

Let me pray. Father God, I pray against Satan and demons. I pray for the churches in this city. I pray for this church in this city. Thank you for the older Christians who have served, and sacrificed, and suffered. Thank you for the newer Christians and the recent eighteen baptisms. Thank you that there is still a Christian witness here. Thank you, Lord Jesus, that you are watching this city. And thank you, Lord Jesus, for watching over this church. I pray for the young people, especially the young men, that their hearts would be full of hope, that they would not be filled with fear, that they would give their lives to the service of Jesus. And that, Lord Jesus, the church, and this city, and this nation, would grow. Thank you for this magnificent opportunity that you have given my brothers and sisters. This is a hard task, but you are a great God. And so we do not fear, in Jesus' name. Amen. Thank you.

POSTSCRIPT

So, the one thing we didn't get to show you is what happened after the sermon. I was rushing out the door to catch a flight, and the military was keeping an eye on me. And there was a man, young man, who stopped me and he said, "Hey, I really wanna talk to you." And I told him, "Hey, I've got just a minute and then I've gotta go catch this flight." He said, "Well, I feel like I'm supposed to become a Christian but my family's gonna disown me, I'll lose the inheritance, I won't be part of the family business, I will probably even get killed." And he said, "In addition to becoming a Christian, I know if I become a Christian, Jesus is asking me to become a pastor, and I don't wanna die."

And so I looked him in the eye, and I told him, "You need to do what Jesus tells you to do. What has Jesus told you to do?" And he looked me in the eye, teared up and scared, and he said, "He's told me to become a Christian and plant a church." I said, "Then do that, and do not be afraid." So pray for him. Pray for his church. Pray for his city, where the persecution still continues.

Note: This sermon transcript has been edited for readability.