

## **The Suffering Church Is Blessed**

Revelation 2:8-11

(preached Pine Grove 11/13/16; Sunday PM)

### **Introduction**

Let us turn to the book of Revelation this morning as we look inside another church of the 1st century...

This time Jesus sends a messenger to the church at Smyrna...

Let us see what he says to that church in Revelation 2:8-11...

***8 “And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The first and the last, who [e]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. [f]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.’***

Let us pray.

The church in America in 2016 does not understand persecution or suffering..

I hear reports of religious persecution all the time, and Fox News even has a reporter dedicated to covering religious persecution, but nothing in this country has risen to the level of religious persecution.

Sure, there are religious freedoms that are being eroded all the time, yet it still costs a person very little if anything to be a Christian in this nation today...

And though we value that freedom, it actually has worked against the church...

Because the absence of religious persecution often fattens the church...

If being a Christian is not dangerous, everyone flocks to the church, and that is exactly what has happened in this country over the last 200 + years of our existence...

And though God has used that freedom to accomplish much in our nation, we now find ourselves in a day and age where the church is filled with uncommitted and unsaved people...

And that has led to numerous problems today...

Look, I often tell people that I would never pray for religious persecution, but I do realize that persecution is a blessing to the church....

And though that sounds like a contradiction, it is completely true...

Persecution purifies the church for this simple reason....

Hypocrites don't hang around to be persecuted for something that they truly don't believe in...

Let me put it this way...

If you came to me and said, here's two free tickets to a South Carolina game...

Boxed seats and a free buffet for all 4 quarters...

Do you want to go?

I would go in a heart beat.

I'd eat the food, enjoy the excitement of the game, pull for whoever Carolina was playing simply because it costs me nothing to go..

But if you asked me to join you in the same situation, except the the ticket would cost \$200...

There's no way I would go...

The cost is too high to see a team I don't truly believe in or enjoy...

The same is true for the unbeliever in the church.

When the cost gets too high to come, he is gone and the church shrinks but it shrinks in a good way.

Because it eliminates folks who don't truly want to be there...

In our current situation, persecution in the church has not yet risen to the level where the false Christians are leaving.

Now, I am not saying that day isn't coming.

I believe it is, but it won't come until persecution comes first.

And though it is unsettling to think about, it will be a blessed day for the American church when persecution rises and the purification of the church begins..

Today, we are going to look at an ancient church that was truly persecuted...

And what you will notice about this church is that Jesus has nothing negative to say about it in the 4 verses that he writes to them...

And the reason for that is simple...

A truly persecuted church is a holy church...

And how do I know that?

Because people who stick around in persecution prove that their faith in the Lord is real....

You wouldn't stick around to suffer unless you truly believe the truth that you are suffering for..

Yet, the people at the church in Smyrna had stuck around in the middle of incredible suffering and persecution, and Jesus had nothing but encouragement to offer them...

And in Jesus' message to the church, I want us to see 3 benefits of persecution and suffering in a church and even in your own life...

Let's begin in verse 8, where we will see this...

## **I. Suffering is Temporary, but Christ is Eternal (8)**

Now remember, we are on the second of 7 messages that Jesus is delivering to 7 real churches in John's day..

These churches were near the island of Patmos where John had been exiled as punishment..

Then on a Sunday, John had a surprise visitor to the island..

Jesus Christ in his resurrected glorified body appears behind John and ask him to write down all he has seen...

And then tells him to write down 7 messages to 7 real churches in the late 90s AD...

The 7 messages would be taken to each church by 7 messengers...

Last week, we examined the message to the church at Ephesus, where Jesus told them to return to their first love...

Today, we move 30 miles north to the church at Smyrna...

Smyrna was an important port city in Asia Minor...

You can see its location on the map right here.

It was in a very strategic place as ships brought in goods over the ocean, Smyrna had a system of roads that led to all parts of Asia Minor...

It was very centrally located, and it was considered one of the most beautiful cities of the ancient world...

Smyrna is the only one of the 7 cities that still exists in our modern world.

All the others have gone away, but Smyrna still exists and it now called Izmir, Turkey..

It has a population of over 200,000 people and Mediterranean cruise ships stop there regularly.

Here are some pictures of the city today..

It is a situation where the mountains gradually fall into the sea, so it is very picturesque as it was in 95 AD when Jesus wrote to the church there.

We don't know how the church in Smyrna was founded.

Most likely, someone visited the church at Ephesus, and simply took the gospel north and settled there.

However, as pretty as Smyrna was to the eye, it was completely ugly to the Christian church that existed there...

First, Smyrna was home to worship of the Greek gods and goddesses...

But Smyrna was also home to the the worship of the Roman emperor at the time...

In fact, a law existed in Smyrna and throughout the Roman empire that all Roman citizens had to go to an altar of Caesar once a year and burn incense in his honor..

Once that act was finished, someone at the altar would hand you a certificate of completion, and anyone found not holding a current certificate was given the death penalty.

Well, this put the Christians in Smyrna and the church at Smyrna at risk...

Christians were not going to worship a false god, and so the church at Smyrna was often under attack for its refusal to comply..

And therefore, Jesus comes to that church with some very encouraging words that we will read today, but he starts his message to them this way...

Verse 8..



***8 “And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write:  
The first and the last, who [e]was dead, and has come  
to life, says this:***

In each message to the 7 churches, Jesus begins his message with a description of Himself...

To the church at Ephesus, he was the one holding the 7 stars and walking among the 7 lamp stands..

But to the church at Smyrna, Jesus is the one who is first and last and the one who was dead but now lives...

And that is important to the church at Smyrna for this reason...

Jesus existed before their persecution and he will exist beyond their persecution...

Persecution is what lead to Jesus' death, but suffering that leads to death is not an end...

Persecution may lead to the deaths of those in Smyrna, but death for the Christian is simply the doorway to life..

The people in the church at Smyrna needed to realize everyday that suffering and persecution are real and painful, but more importantly for the Christian, they are temporary...

Jesus is eternal; he is the first and the last and those in Him need to constantly remember that...

What did the David write?

***Psalm 30:5a***

***Weeping may last for the night,  
But a shout of joy comes in the morning.***

Then ***2 Cor 4:17....***

***17 For momentary, light affliction is producing for us  
an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison,***

When suffering or persecution comes to us as a church or as individual Christians, we need to realize that Jesus is eternal while our suffering is for a little while...

It is so easy in the midst of suffering to never think there is light at the end of the tunnel, yet if you are in Christ, there is hope...

More than that, there is peace in knowing that Christ is worthy of our suffering..

But even beyond that, there is the promise that nothing can separate us from the love of God...

Jesus suffered to the point of death, but even death could not separate him from the love of the Father who raised him back to life...

If persecution and suffering ever comes to this church or to your life, you must remember that it is only temporary, but Christ and his purposes are eternal...

The second aspect of suffering we see here is in verse 9...

## **II. Suffering is Painful, but God Blesses (9)**

Look at verse 9...

***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.***

Once again, just like last week, we are reminded that Jesus knows everything...

And he knew all about the suffering and persecution and tribulation that was coming and had come to the church in Smyrna...

And he knows all about your suffering as well..

If you are suffering under an unreasonable boss at work and doing in a way that honors Christ, Jesus knows that...

If you are living with an unbelieving spouse, and suffering from his or her unreasonableness, Jesus knows that.

If you having health problems but doing it with a smile and trust in the Lord, Jesus knows that..

He knows our troubles because he lived in the world, but he knows them best because he knows us best...

And he knew the church at Smyrna...

He knew their troubles...

Though the majority of the town of Smyrna was wealthy due to the benefit of its port and sea trade, the church at Smyrna was poor...

Failure to worship Caesar caused the government to take property from the church...

Often, people in the church were not offered jobs...

The treatment of the church at Smyrna was horrible...

The government soon learned that killing Christians was not always the best thing to do...

#1 - Because it didn't seem to deter the other Christians...

But #2 - it often drew more people to the church when they witnessed the bravery of those being killed...

So, the government decided to starve them out...

To make living conditions for the church almost impossible...

And so when Jesus says they were poor, he meant they literally had nothing...

Yet, look what He says right after that...

You are rich...

And he was right....

When the Lord is all you have, He is more than you need..

Only the poor can say they are rich when they are in Christ...

And the Smyrnans may not have been rolling in the dough, but they had the bread of life and that made them very rich...

And top of the financial persecution were the personal attacks of their enemies...

Jesus tells them in the middle of verse 9 that he knows that the Jews in Smyrna had been attacking and slandering them...

The reason for Jewish persecution was simple..

They claimed that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah..

The Jews gnashed their teeth at such an idea.

They saw Jesus as a heretic.

They saw Him as a blasphemer of God, and they saw Christians as blasphemers as well..

The book of Acts is the story of Jewish persecution of the early church..

Stephen was stoned by the Jewish religious leaders..

Christians were threatened and killed by other Jewish authorities ever since the church began..

And this persecution had even come to Smyrna in the mid 90s...

Jews were most likely turning in Christians who weren't burning incense to Caesar..

Christ even calls this group of Jews a synagogue of Satan...

And look, troubles come in all forms, but some of the hardest to take is slander...

Where people use words to harm others...

So how does Jesus comfort in that, he uses words to comfort us?

Let me tell you what to do when the world is using words to persecute you, turn to the word of God...

Pick up your Bible and read what God has to say to you...

We put so much stock in what people say, but we very rarely care about what God says...

Who cares what the world about you as long as God is pleased with you?

In Smyrna, the Christians were attacked financially and verbally, yet in those attacks, God blessed them with wealth of having Him and with His words right here in the book of Revelation.

That brings us to verses 10-11 and our final truth about persecution and suffering....



### **III. Suffering Robs, But God Rewards (10-11)**

If you were reading this for the very first time, you would expect a promise of relief in verse 10...

I mean, isn't that what is supposed to happen here?

Doesn't the good guy win and ride off into the sunset on a horse?

Well, not always and not here...

Look at what Jesus says in verse 10...

***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.***

This is not the happy ending I was expecting...

Jesus knows all about their suffering, but please note that he doesn't offer any immediate help...

He doesn't say I am coming to crush that synagogue of Satan that is attacking you...

He doesn't say that he was coming to overthrow the Roman government that was putting them into poverty..

In fact, Jesus tells them in verse 10 that it is going to get worse...

Because the devil is about to work to have some Christians in Smyrna thrown in jail...

To test them for a period of 10 days...

And I think there is a great application for us today that you won't hear preached in many churches, yet it is very true...

And the application is this...

Sometimes, God doesn't rescue us from our troubles on earth...

Sometimes the trials get worse...

That is why I have such a huge problem with preachers who get up and preach a gospel that says life will get better if you come to Christ...

The truth is this....

Sometimes your earthly life doesn't get better after salvation...

In fact, salvation may make your life worse.

Ask the Muslim in Iraq who comes to faith in Christ and is ex-communicated by his family...

Ask the Jew who comes to faith in Christ and is spit on by his closet friends and family...

Ask the wife who gets saved and has to live with a man who cares nothing for her faith...

But I can assure you of this....

Your life after this earth will be much better after salvation...

The gospel is not a promise of a better life now, but it is a promise of a better life to come...

In Smyrna, things were going to get worse before they got better...

But look at the promise of Jesus Christ at the end of verse 10...

***[f]Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.***

Before we get to the good news of this verse, please don't miss the bad news of this verse...

Sometimes suffering and persecution leads to death..

50 years after this letter was written to Smyrna, a man named Polycarp was their pastor...

Word got back to the government authorities that Polycarp would not give tribute to Caesar.

So the Roman government arrested him and sentenced him to die..

They marched him to an arena where he would be executed.

They gave him one final option of making a sacrifice to Caesar before the sentence was carried out...

And Polcarp looked at his accusers in the eye and said...

For 86 years, I have served the Lord, and He has done me no wrong. So I can I blaspheme Him now and do Him wrong?"

The authorities then warned him that flames of fire awaited him...

To which, Polycarp responded, “You threaten me with fire that burns for a time and goes out, but you have no idea that all of you are destined for fire that never goes out if you reject our Lord. So, come and do what you must to me, but consider the fire that awaits you while you watch me burn.”

And they lit the fire and Polycarp was burned to death..

Yet, death brought him the crown of eternal life with Christ...

That is the promise of the gospel and all who repent and believe in Christ...

Death is no longer our enemy but simply the process of our faith becoming sight...

For the Christian, death loses its sting...

And then to make sure his readers understand perfectly, Jesus ends his message with this in verse 11..

***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. ’***

The overcomer in Revelation is always the faithful Christian...

For the church in Smyrna, the overcomer was the one who held onto his faith in spite of persecution...

We are overcomers in here this morning if we are saved.

WE have overcome the penalty of sin by the blood of Christ..

We have overcome the death grip that the Satan had on our lives..

We are overcoming today as we press on believing the gospel despite the world rejecting Christ..

The idea of an overcomer is the fact that we will overcome if we are truly saved...

Our salvation is affirmed by the fact that we do overcome...

The church in Smyrna overcame the persecution.

That doesn't necessarily mean that they were rescued from it...

That doesn't mean that some of them didn't lose their life because of their faith in Christ..

They probably did..

They were simply overcomes because their faith survived the most brutal attacks..

Financial troubles didn't make them lose their faith.

Slander and lies didn't make them lose their faith..

Government persecution and prison time didn't make them lose their faith.

Being tied to a stake and set on fire didn't make them lose their faith...

They were overcomers simply because the persecutions and sufferings ant tribulations and trials of this world couldn't overcome their faith...

That is the church at Smyrna.

And look what their reward is...

The second death will not hurt them.

What is the second death?

It is the death of that comes from being cast into the lake of fire at the Great White Throne Judgment.

It is an eternal death that never ends...

You don't go out of existence at the lake of fire, you die every day in flames of judgment that never go out...

The lake of fire is a death that never ends...

The first death is the physical death that every man is destined to experience....

The second death still awaits those who died without Christ...

When you reject Christ, you assure yourself of a second death in the lake of fire...

Yet if you repent of your sins and come to faith in Christ, you escape the second death...

Your only death is the first death and it leads to a life where you never die again..

The saying is true...

If you are only born once, you will die twice.

If you are born twice, you will only die once...

By their perseverance and endurance, the Smyrna showed that they were a church of people who had been truly born again through faith in Christ..



And since they had been born twice, they were only going to die once...

And that death would lead to eternal life...

## **Conclusion**

Friends, this is the persecuted church, and we truly don't have any way to relate to them as a church..

We have not seen that kind of persecution here, and though it may be coming, we still enjoy the blessing of living free from the persecution that Smyrna saw.

Yet, I pray that Pine Grove would be a faithful church if persecution comes...

I pray that we would overcome the attacks and simply hold to Christ...

But I also pray for the individual afflictions we all have...

I pray that our trials and sufferings would not overcome us...

I pray that we would be faithful unto death like the church at Smyrna as we look forward to the crown of life that is promised to us...

I would remind you today that whatever faces you in the world is nothing compared to what you will face in eternity...

Don't sell out eternity to have what you want now.

Keep your eyes on what is coming and the things that you face now won't seem so big...

I want one final thing in this passage today that is kinda interesting to me...

Look back at all of the opposites that we see in these 4 verses..

The first and the last...

The dead who is living...

You are poor but rich..

Die and you will get a crown of life....

This is the the incredible thing about the gospel..

It turns our life upside down..

Salvation takes us from darkness to light...

From sinner to saint...

From rich to poor...

From lost to found...

For the people in Smyrna, trouble brought blessings..

Poverty brought wealth...

Words of persecution from their enemies brought words  
of comfort from their Lord...

This is what the gospel does..

It takes dead men and brings them to life..

And it does it in the most opposite way that we would  
expect..

We would expect that we would have to work to be  
saved, yet God simply tells us to let go of our works and  
believe in His Son...

I got a feeling that some of you may need your world  
turned upside down this morning...

You need to stop doing what you think pleases God and  
do what He says HE wants...

And that is for you to repent of your sins, and put all of  
your trust in Jesus Christ....

Here is what the gospel says to you this morning...

Die to yourself this morning, and God will bring you to life like never before..

If you are lost this morning, God has found you and he has called you to faith in Christ alone..

If you are guilty this morning, the gospel will make you innocent..

Come to Christ.

In the quietness of your heart, call on Him to save you and He will...

Let us pray.