

May 14, 2023 by Steve Brandon



Be Faithful Unto Death

Revelation 2:8-11

1. **Jesus Lives (verse 8).**
2. **Jesus Knows (verse 9).**
3. **Jesus Rewards (verse 10).**
4. **Jesus Calls (verse 11).**

In 155 A. D., an eighty-six year-old man whose name was Polycarp was residing in a country house, not far from the city of Smyrna in Asia Minor. It was a Friday afternoon. He was resting upstairs, when some fully armed Roman authorities barged into the house as if they were arresting a dangerous criminal. They were looking to arrest this old man.

Polycarp welcomed the visitors and ordered that food and drink be served them. Before he was taken away in chains, Polycarp had but one request: that he would be given one hour to pray. The officers granted the request. They enjoyed their food and drink as they listened to Polycarp pray for two hours. The soldiers had second thoughts about arresting such a godly man. But they were under orders. And arrest him, they did.

Upon entering the city, Polycarp was brought into a stadium, filled with people. Everyone knew why Polycarp was there! The Romans were planning on putting him to death, unless he recanted. So, Polycarp was ushered in to stand before the proconsul, who asked him if he was, indeed, Polycarp.

When Polycarp affirmed his identity, the proconsul said, "Have respect to your old age. ... Swear by the future of Caesar; Repent, and say, 'Away with the Atheists.'" (In those days, the Christians were called "Atheists," as they denied the Roman pantheon of gods). To this, Polycarp gazed around the stadium, and waves his open palm to them all and said, "Away with the Atheists!"

The proconsul was not pleased with Polycarp, but he gave him another opportunity. He said, "Swear, and I will set you at liberty. Reproach Christ." But Polycarp replied, "Eighty and six years I have served him, and he never did me any injury. How then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior."

Yet again, Polycarp was given another opportunity to recant. The proconsul said, "Swear by the fortune of Caesar!" Polycarp replied, "Since you are vainly insisting that I should swear by the fortune of Caesar, hear me declare with boldness, I am a Christian. And if you wish to learn what the doctrines of Christianity are, appoint me a day, and you shall hear them." The proconsul retorted, "Persuade the people." Polycarp replied, "To you I have thought it right to offer an account of my faith; For we are taught to give all due honor to the powers and authorities which are ordained of God. But as for these, I do not deem the worthy of receiving any account from me."

The proconsul tried again, "I have wild beasts at hand; to these I will cast you, if you don't repent." Polycarp said, "Call them! We are not accustomed to repent of what is good in order to adopt that which is evil."

Again, the proconsul, "I will cause you to be consumed by fire, seeing that you despise the wild beasts, if you will not repent." Again Polycarp, "You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour, and after a little is extinguished. But you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. Why do you tarry? Bring forth what you will."

The proconsul then instructed the herald to announce to the entire stadium three times, "Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian" "Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian" "Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian" Thus, he was ordered to be burned at the stake.

Once the funeral pile was ready, Polycarp laid aside his garments, and took his place on the pile. They were about to fix his hands to the stake with nails. Polycarp said, "Leave me as I am; for he that gives me strength to endure the fire, will also enable me, without your securing me by nails, to remain without moving in the pile." They didn't nail him. Instead, they bound him with his hands behind him.

Thus being bound like a ram taken from the flock for a sacrifice, Polycarp 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 and powers, and of every creature, and of the whole race of the righteous who live before you, I give you thanks that you have counted me, worthy of this day and this hour, that I should have a part in the number of your martyrs, in the cup of your Christ, to the resurrection of eternal life, both of soul and body, through the incorruption imparted by the Holy Spirit. Among whom may I be accepted this day before you as a fat and acceptable sacrifice, according as you, the ever-truthful God, has fore-ordained, have revealed beforehand to me, and now have fulfilled. Wherefore also I praise you for all things. I bless you. I glorify you, along with the everlasting and heavenly Jesus Christ, your beloved Son with whom, to you, and the Holy Spirit be glory both now and to all coming ages. Amen."

Then, the fire was kindled. As the flame blazed forth with great fury, it shaped itself into an arch, encompassing as a circle around the body of Polycarp. As one eye-witnessed said, "[Polycarp] appeared withing not like flesh which is burnt, but as bread that is baked." When the officials perceived that his body would not be consumed by the fire, they commanded an executioner to go near and pierce him through with

a dagger. So much blood came out of his side, that the fire was extinguished. Thus is the story of the martyrdom of Polycarp. [\[1\]](#)

Now, what is especially important about this story is that Polycarp was the bishop of Smyrna, the same church that we will look at this morning in our exposition of the book of Revelation. the same church that was told that they too may be martyred for their faith.

So, if you haven't done so already, I invite you to open in your Bibles to Revelation, chapter 2. This morning, we will be looking at verses 8-11, which is the message of Jesus to the church in Smyrna. I want to read them for you now.

Revelation 2:8-11

And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: '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 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.'

The title of my message this morning comes from the phrase toward the end of verse 10, "Be Faithful Unto Death." This was the call of Jesus upon the lives of those in Smyrna, to know that prison awaited for some of them, to expect tribulation and death. so be faithful when that time comes. It's a call to martyrdom. It's a call not to deny Jesus.

In many ways, this is the burden of the book of Revelation. Remember, Revelation is written to persecuted people. those going through great tribulation. That's how John introduced himself in the Revelation. "I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus" (Revelation 1:8). John was a partner in the tribulation that the readers of the book were going through.

I have said this now for several weeks, and I will say it again. **The key to understanding the book of Revelation is that it was written during a time of persecution.** John writes to assure his readers that Jesus is the king, and that he is indeed coming back to judge the wrong and establish his reign. Thus, the importance of enduring.

This is where we in America have difficulty understanding Revelation, because we are at ease. and we easily miss the heart of John in the Revelation, being more interested in understanding the times of the end, that we might avoid the tribulation, rather than persevering through it. But not so those in Smyrna. they were in the midst of tribulation, not escaping it. They were facing the real possibility of prison and death for the sake of Jesus (verse 9). and they needed help to walk faithfully through it. That's why the first thing that Jesus says to them makes so much sense. so look at verse 8, 8

Revelation 1:8

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

In this verse, we see that ...

1. Jesus Lives (verse 8).

Verse 8 begins the same way that all of the letters in Revelation 2-3 begin, with Jesus talking to the "angel of the church." Again, I'm not sure whether this is a real angel, or referring to the pastor of these churches, as the one who brings a message (like angels do), In either case, the message is clear. It's a personalized message to the church in Smyrna.

Again, let me remind you, John is writing from the prison-island Patmos, to the seven churches of Revelation: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. These are real churches in real cities.

The city of Smyrna had quite a history. It had been founded as a Greek colony as far back as 1000 B. C. that's the time when David was reigning in Israel. Around 600 B. C., the Lydians came and attacked the city, and essentially destroyed it. For 300 years, the city, sat in ruins. But around 300 B. C., the city was rebuilt under the leadership of a man named Lysimachus, (LISA MACHUS) who enlarged the streets, making them straight and broad. By the time of the New Testament, Smyrna was a beautiful, thriving city, engaged in much trade, with much political and religious influence in the region. [\[2\]](#)

So, if you will, Smyrna had been dead as a city, but now had been brought to life. By the time John wrote the Revelation, it was flourishing again. This is the very thing that Jesus says to them about himself. Look at verse 8, Jesus says, 8 'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. Like the city of Smyrna, Jesus experienced death. Like the city of Smyrna, Jesus is now very much alive and well. Or, as I have said it, "Jesus lives!"

This is exactly what those in Smyrna needed to hear. This is almost verbatim of what we saw in chapter 1. Look back at chapter 1:17, when John saw the vision of Jesus, he fell at his feet, as if he were a dead man. Jesus put his right hand on him and said, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forever more" (Revelation 1:17-18).

This is exactly what those who are potentially facing death need to know. that Jesus conquered death. Death is not the final word. There is hope after death. If there is hope after death, you need not fear death! That's going to be what Jesus tells those in Smyrna. "Do not fear what you are about to suffer" (Revelation 2:10). The reason why we don't need to fear death is because Jesus has conquered death. Yes, he was dead. He was crucified on the cross for our sins! But his death wasn't permanent. he rose from the dead. We celebrate this every Easter! Jesus rose from the dead and conquered death for us!

We have no need to fear the grave. Death has lost its power over us! Paul said it this way: "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:55). Jesus took the sting out of death! And once you lose your fear of death, there's not a lot to fear.

Losing your fear of death can stir boldness in you. Losing your fear of death will reduce your fear of man. Losing your fear of death will help you live fully today! Jesus says, "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28).

This is the first point of what Jesus says to the church in Smyrna: Jesus Lives (verse 8). Now, in verse 9, we see that ...

2. Jesus Knows (verse 9).

Revelation 2:9

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.

Jesus knows all about the church in Smyrna. He knows of their situation and what they are dealing with. And this is not unique to Smyrna. In fact, if you look at all seven churches of Revelation, you see a similar pattern.

Revelation 2:2 to Ephesus: "I know your works."
Revelation 2:12 to Pergamum: "I know where you dwell."
Revelation 2:18 to Thyatira: "I know your works."
Revelation 3:1 to Sardis: "I know your works."
Revelation 3:8 to Philadelphia: "I know your works."
Revelation 3:15 to Laodicea: "I know your works."

Jesus knows all about the churches. Every single one of them. This is good and bad. Jesus knows our good points. Jesus also knows our bad points. And this is how each of these letters progress. Jesus begins with commendation about the things that the church is doing well. And then, Jesus continues on with his concerns about the church. We saw this last week with Ephesus. Jesus commends them as a hard-working, discerning church. But then, Jesus expresses his concerns about the church: they had left their first love. We will see this pattern throughout these seven churches.

Except that here in Smyrna, Jesus says nothing bad about them. Instead, Jesus' words come with compassion and grace. The only other church like this is the church in Philadelphia, the small, but faithful church. Of this church, Jesus says that they had "but little power" (Revelation 3:8).

Again, verse 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."

1. Tribulation

Those in Smyrna were experiencing "tribulation." That word often comes up when one studies eschatology (last things). At its core meaning, "tribulation" means "to press or squeeze." Metaphorically, this describes any sort of oppression, affliction or distress. Tribulation in the life of a Christian is a common experience. Jesus said to his disciples, "In the world, you will have tribulation" (John 16:33).

Tribulation can come from the circumstances of life, as is the case here in Smyrna. Or, Jesus himself can bring tribulation. When speaking to the church in Thyatira, Jesus will say to those who refuse to repent of sexual immorality, "Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works" (Revelation 2:22).

Now, here in Smyrna, I believe that the tribulation that they are experiencing is the tribulation of all who desire to live faithfully for Christ in a hostile world. When you try to be light in a dark place, you won't be looked upon with admiration. you will be scorned and ridiculed and mocked for your faith. So, take heart the words of Jesus, "In the world, you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world. That's how we as believers ought to overcome" (John 16:33).

2. Poverty

Now, in verse 9, we see several other difficulties that those in Smyrna were facing. They are facing poverty. Again, verse 9, "I know your tribulation and your poverty. That means that they were facing financial hardships. We don't know why, in a flourishing city like Smyrna, those in the church were in poverty. Except that this is often the ways of God. When God builds his church, he doesn't necessarily bring in the strong and the rich. He brings in the weak and the poor, to show that the power of the church is him!

Do you remember what Paul said to those in Corinth?

1 Corinthians 1:26-29

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even the things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

This how God designs the church, with the weak, that he might be strong. And I have no doubt that this is why those in Smyrna were facing poverty. Because it's the poor who see their need and cry out to one who is able to save them. This is why Jesus adds his parenthetical comment in verse 9, "I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich)." They may be poor on the horizontal realm, but on the vertical realm, they are rich! You might think of those in Smyrna like those in any third-world country today. Poverty exists all around. Yet, those who have trusted in Jesus, have a wealth and joy that the world doesn't comprehend. I have seen it on my missionary journeys in Nepal and India. By our standards, the poorest among us would be the richest of those in the church. Yet, they have a richness in their souls

that ought not to be despised.

Paul described his own life as being "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything" (2 Corinthians 6:10). Such were those in Smyrna.

3. Persecution

But in verse 9, we see a third characteristic of the church. They were facing religious persecution from the Jews. Look again at verse 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."

A few months ago, we wrapped up preaching through Acts. Do you remember the one major source of persecution that came upon the church? It was from the Jews in the synagogues. Paul would come to a city and preach the gospel in the synagogues how Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah! the one who died upon the cross for our sins! that we simply need to trust in him to experience the forgiveness he offers! For a time, the Jews would tolerate Paul's message. But then, when they really understood what Paul was saying, they would turn hostile. They would contradict Paul and revile him (Acts 13:45). They would stir up the crowds (Acts 13:50; 17:5). They would drive Paul out their cities (Acts 13:50). And when they heard that Paul was in the next town over doing the same thing, they would travel to that town to further expel Paul from their parts of the world (Acts 14:19; 17:13).

Certainly, some of that was happening here in Smyrna. The church was faithfully gathering together, enjoying the message of God's grace to them in Christ, extending God's glory as they spoke with others about Jesus, loving each other in the bonds of the church, and caring for one another's needs. And the Jews were hating it!

So, the Jews slandered them! (verse 9). They spoke false things about the Christians in Smyrna. They maintained that they were following a false god. They said that they were cannibals, because they claimed to eat the flesh of another. They held that they were immoral, because they celebrated their "love feasts." All of this gave them a bad reputation.

The Jews did this because of who they really were. Although they had the Jewish name, and the Jewish Scriptures, and professed to worship the God of Israel, in actuality, their synagogue was a "synagogue of Satan." Truth be known today, there are churches today that are "churches of Satan" as well. Oh, not overt, not worshiping Satan, but in the name of Jesus, promoting sinful lifestyles, and waging war in the culture against the true gospel of Christ crucified for our sins!

Well, this is what Smyrna was facing, and Jesus told them that he knew all about it. And I'm sure the church in Smyrna was comforted.

Let's move on to verse 10. In this verse, we see the core exhortation to the church.

Revelation 2:10

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.

Here's my point from verse 10:

3. Jesus Rewards (verse 10).

You see that right there in the last phrase of verse 10, "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life" This is the reward that believers have to look forward to! the crown of life! Obviously, that's a metaphorical picture of everlasting life.

This past week, the world witnessed the coronation of a king, King Charles III. The key moment of that coronation was when the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby placed St. Edward's Crown upon Charles III's head. It was the moment that he was crowned king. That's a picture of the reward that all believers in Jesus Christ will receive, when they have persevered until the end, and when they stand before Jesus and hear him say, "Well done, my good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:23). We will receive the crown of life.

Did you know that the only time King Charles will ever wear St. Edward's Crown was on his coronation day? After that day, the crown is placed back in the Jewel House in the Tower of London, awaiting for the coronation of the next monarch. But not so the crown of life that believers in Jesus Christ will receive. Our crown will remain on our heads throughout eternity! This is where Revelation is headed, to chapter 22. where we see the river of the water of life (Revelation 22:10. and the tree of life (Revelation 22:2). Where we will eat and drink forevermore in the presence of our God! This is the promise that is laid out in verse 10!

But to get the crown, one must suffer first. Jesus says, "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." Here Jesus is warning those who are in Smyrna of the tribulation that is coming upon some of them: Prison and death.

They will be thrown into prison. This was merely the prelude to their death. In the ancient world, prisons were often cold and damp places. They were unsanitary places without toilets and infested with rats. Putrid smells would waft through the prison. The only food that was available came from your friends on the outside of the prison, who would bring you food, so hunger was common place.

This is what some of those in Smyrna were facing. Perhaps for them, it meant torture as well. But the good news is this, their torment would only be for ten days. That is, God was in control of their tribulation.

The devil may be the one throwing them into prison, but the Lord is the warden of the prison. The Lord determines how long the prisoner's stay would be. And in this instance, it would only be ten days.

Ten days of hardship to receive the crown of life! Is it worth it? Yes, it is! That's the point! The devil is going to throw you into prison. You are going to suffer. You are going to be tested. But stay true, because in the end your reward will come! you will get the crown of life, which no one will be able to remove from your head! And with that end in view, it is reasonable not to fear the suffering that is coming your way.

Is not this the view that Polycarp had when talking with the proconsul? Polycarp had temporal suffering in mind. "You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour, and after a little is extinguished. But you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly.

Easily Polycarp could have added, "But you are ignorant of the reward that is coming my way! It comes to all who are faithful unto death! I am awaiting the crown of life that will never be removed from me!"

Isn't it interesting to know that Polycarp would have read this promise in verse 10: It was written to the church in Smyrna, of whom he was a leader. In fact, several early church fathers (Irenaeus and Tertullian) say that Polycarp was a disciple of John. Knowing that a reward awaits us, will strengthen us today. to be faithful unto death, if ever that day should come to our lives.

Those in Smyrna had an example to follow. Next week, we will be considering Antipas, who Jesus calls, "my faithful witness, who was killed among you where Satan dwells" (Revelation 2:13).

OK, we have one more verse left in our text. and I have one last point.

4. Jesus Calls (verse 11).

Revelation 2:11

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.'

Verse 11 is closely parallel to all of the closing comments to the churches in Revelation 2-3. The phrase "he who has an ear, let him hear" comes in Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22. This is a summons to Rock Valley Bible Church, to listen to what Jesus has said to Smyrna!

The phrase "to the one who conquers" occurs in Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21. With each church, "the one who conquers" carries a different meaning. In this case, to those in Smyrna, it means "to the one who remains faithful to Christ, even unto death will not be hurt by the second death."

Jesus said, "the one who endures to the end will be saved" (Matthew 24:13). Christianity isn't about starting. It's about finishing. It's about enduring to the end.

Now, having preached through this church in Smyrna, you might be thinking that this isn't so applicable to you. And indeed, you will probably not be martyred for your faith. Yet, we are all called to die. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24).

This idea of taking up your cross is a willingness to die. You are taking your cross to the place of crucifixion. It means dying to yourself. It means living for Christ, whatever may be the consequences. For those who received the Revelation, death was a real possibility. In chapter 12, we will read of those who conquer Satan:

Revelation 12:10-11

And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.

"They loved not their lives even unto death." The promise of verse 11 is that "The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death."

What is the second death? It's exactly what it sound like, it's death after death. It's mentioned in Revelation 20:14-15, "Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" (Revelation 20:14-15). The second death is identified as "the lake of fire." But the promise here in verse 11 is that if you endure until the end, you will not be thrown into the lake of fire. Sure you will die once. That takes you out of this world into the realm of Christ, where you will receive that crown.

The second death is also mentioned in Revelation 21:8, "But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death." This is those who have not repented of their deeds. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, we are told of those who engaged in these very things. But they repented. Paul said that they were "washed" and "sanctified" and "justified" in the name of Jesus. Yet, in Revelation, we see those who have continued on in their sin to be condemned to the second death.

Do you want to die once or twice? I guarantee that you want only to die once, because it is not death to die. This is because the second death is the real death. The first death is not dying. The second death is dying. Consider the words the following song:

Verse 1
It is not death to die
To leave this weary road
And join the saints who dwell on high
Who've found their home with God

It is not death to close
The eyes long dimmed by tears
And wake in joy before Your throne
Delivered from our fears

CHORUS

O Jesus, conquering the grave
Your precious blood has power to save
Those who trust in You
Will in Your mercy find
That it is not death to die

VERSE 2

It is not death to fling
Aside this earthly dust
And rise with strong and noble wing
To live among the just
It is not death to hear
The key unlock the door
That sets us free from mortal years
To praise You evermore^[3]

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on May 14, 2023 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.

[1] "The Martyrdom of Polycarp" can be read here: https://ccel.org/ccel/polycarp/martyrdom_of_polycarp/anf01
<https://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1-300/polycarp-11629601.html>.

[2] See William Barclay, The Revelation of John, Volume 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), pp. 74-75 and <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smyrna>.

[3] Bob Kauflin, "It Is Not Death to Die" (<https://sovereigngracemusic.org/music/songs/it-is-not-death-to-die/>).