

## **The Faithfulness of the Redeemed!**

Do you have God's perspective on death?

Some people view death as the end of it all.

God's Word describes death as the beginning of what will last for eternity!

Do you have God's perspective on the troubles you face?

Some people will do anything to stay away from trouble, including compromise what they say they believe.

God's Word praises those who get in trouble because they believe!

Do you believe it's possible to die relatively poor here but be rich in Heaven?

Some people do everything they can to get money to spend on themselves here.

God's Word praises those who store up for themselves treasures in Heaven!

**Folks, you either have God's eternal perspective on things or you have mankind's ever-changing perspective on things.**

Today we come to Jesus' letter to the church at Smyrna, a church that was facing intense pressure yet was remaining faithful to Jesus!

If you went from Ephesus to Smyrna, you would travel 35 miles North from Ephesus and enter Smyrna through the Ephesian Gate.

### **Things we know about Smyrna:**

- It was another important seaport city, also on the direct trade route from India and Persia to Rome!
- Archaeologists have found a large variety of coins there, confirming that a lot of trading went on
- By all accounts a beautiful city, whose name means Myrrh, which was a sweet perfume
- It was known for its trade in wines
- It is still a thriving city today, Modern Izmir in Turkey, with 200,000 people, and many Christians
- It was a wealthy city known for learning, especially in the sciences and medicine
- In addition to having its own stadium, it had a wonderful library
- It had many beautiful paved streets
- One of the most famous was "Golden Street" that was lined with temples
- On one end of the street was a temple to Zeus, and on the other a temple to Cybele
- As you walked down the street you would pass temples to Apollo, Asclepius, and Aphrodite
- But the city was perhaps proudest of having become a center of emperor worship
- In A.D. 23, it won the bidding war over 11 other cities and became the home of the first temple built to honor the Emperor Tiberius, who was the Emperor of Rome when Jesus was crucified
- Now John was probably writing while Domitian was Emperor (81-96 A.D.)
- Under Domitian, emperor worship became compulsory for every Roman citizen on threat of death

- Once a year citizens had to burn incense on the altar and say, “Caesar is Lord”
- When you did this, you were issued a certificate that you had done it!
- One such read, “we the representatives of the Emperor, Serevos and Hermas, have seen you sacrificing.”
- As a center of emperor worship, Smyrna was thus a tough place to be for Christians
- Idol worshippers had no problem saying “Caesar is Lord” and still worshipping idols
- But Christians, who can only affirm that Jesus is Lord, refused to say “Caesar is Lord.”
- So they didn’t get the certificate

Now suppose the government wanted everyone to worship the Emperor. But some wouldn’t do it. Usually coercive governments put economic pressure on people to conform before they kill them.

Imagine a small business owner in Smyrna about to close a deal with somebody. And the person said to them, “Okay, this will be a good deal for both of us, I just need to see your ‘good citizen certificate’ and we’ll have a deal.” “Uh, I don’t have one of those certificates.” “Well, buddy, the law is the law, get out of here.”

Can you begin to imagine the impact that had on their finances?

Imagine being a Christian teenager wanting to go with your friends to the stadium to see a race or animals eating each other. And the ticket taker said, “I’ll just need to see your certificates, kids.” And all the others show theirs but you don’t have one. They all go in while you walk home dejected.

Can you imagine the pressure to go along so you can get along?

Can you imagine how you would feel when it began to go from economic pressure to threats of death if you didn’t conform?

Well, now you know a little how the church at Smyrna felt!

Read Revelation 2:8-11      PRAY!

## **V. 8 Jesus puts death in perspective**

Three times in these four verses death is referred to!

The reality of death overshadowed the church in Smyrna.

Dying for their faith was a very real possibility.

To Ephesus, the church that had lost its first love, Jesus came reminding them that He walked with them and held their pastors in His hand! His invitation to them had been to return to Him as their first love, their time with Him in loving relationship was to energize what they did for Him!

To Smyrna, a church overshadowed by the reality of death, He comes reminding them that He is the first and the last, the One who was dead but came back to life!

It's as if He is saying, "Folks, I know it's tough to face death, but I've been there, and it's not that big a deal!"

He is the first and the last! He was around before there was physical death; He'll be around after physical death! He experienced physical death personally, but lives again!

Are you afraid to die?                      Why?

Death isn't the end of your life; it's the beginning of your eternity!

## **V. 9 Jesus puts difficult circumstances in perspective!**

I imagine these folks in Smyrna were very discouraged!  
Because of their faith they experienced troubles and slander that others didn't!  
And they were poor, barely making ends meet on earth!

They really didn't know what the future held!                      Can anyone here relate?!

Well, folks, Jesus has a way of seeing things differently than we do down here!

He looked at these poor but faithful Smyrna Christians, and he said, "they are the richest people I see in Smyrna!"

Just like when Harry Bailey toasts his poor but faithful brother in "It's a Wonderful Life!" He says, "To George Bailey, the richest man I know!"

This is the same Jesus that said in the Sermon on the Mount:

**"Don't collect for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. But collect for yourselves treasures in Heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves don't break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Matthew 6:19-21**

Jesus was saying “you can’t take it with you, but you can send it ahead!”

Now just a word about this slander coming from those who say they are Jews but are not, but instead are a synagogue of Satan. What’s that mean?!

Now in our day we are accustomed to Jews being very tolerant of Christians and others. The problem in our day has become others being intolerant of Jews.

But in that day many Jews persecuted Jews who believed in Jesus, such as Saul had done before he became Paul the believer! The Book of Acts traces much of this persecution. Paul had written:

“For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, and true circumcision is not something visible in the flesh. On the contrary, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is of the heart – by the Spirit, not the letter. His praise is not from men but from God.” -Romans 2:28-29

Instead of open-mindedly pursuing the truth claims of Christ to be Israel’s Messiah, these false Jews were instruments of Satan.

By the way, that’s the first occurrence of Satan in Rev., but it won’t be the last!

**Something is missing in this letter: no condemnation!**

ONLY of this church and the church of Philadelphia are there no words of condemnation! They were being harassed and persecuted – but they were remaining faithful!

**V. 10 Jesus speaks direct words about what lies ahead for faithful disciples**

You know folks; there are some false teachers that teach a false prosperity gospel that says if you are faithful to Jesus, everything’s going to start going your way...

But they didn’t get that message from the Bible!

In verse ten Jesus tells us what faithful disciples like those in Smyrna may experience: suffering, prison, tribulation, even death.

**What does Jesus say to the faithful:**

**Don’t be afraid of suffering, understand it really could happen to you, and by all means, be faithful even if it involves suffering and even death.**

For the Christian, death is not the worst thing that can happen to them; being unfaithful to Jesus is the worst thing that can happen to them!

Jesus has already essentially said, “I died once, it wasn’t that bad!”  
Now He says, “If you are faithful until death, I will give you the crown of life!”

Do you know that celebrities in the Roman Empire would be featured in coins with crowns on their heads? Jesus said, “you may not get many crowns down there, but if you are faithful to me until death, I’ll put a crown on your head up here!”

We think the worst thing that could happen to a Christian is to be killed for his or her faith. Jesus is saying, “if the worst thing you think that could happen to you happens, I’ll give you a special reward in Heaven only martyrs get!”

“Don’t fear those who kill the body but are not able to kill the soul; rather fear Him who is able to destroy both body and soul in Hell.” -Matthew 10:28

So do you understand what Jesus is saying?  
Being unfaithful to Jesus is a much bigger deal than how you die!

**If you will trade your desire for self preservation in for a desire to simply be faithful to Jesus no matter where you are, what you are facing, or who you are dealing with, you’ll finally be free. And you’ll change your world!**

Now what’s this deal about the tribulation for ten days?!

Bottom line: we’re not sure!

**The most intriguing suggestion about the “10 days” is that this refers to ten decrees of persecution against Christians by Roman Emperors before the time of Constantine, starting with Domitian.**

This usually goes along with the theory that each of these churches represents a period of history, which I personally think is a bit of a stretch!  
Those times of persecution and the proposed ages corresponding to the 7 churches are on the back of your notes.

## **V. 11 The true believer in Jesus will never die twice!**

Jesus has already said, “I died once, it wasn’t that big a deal!”

If we could talk to folks in Heaven, they'd say, "Dying really wasn't that big a deal!" My physical body gave up my spirit, and here I was with Jesus."

Ah, but for those who don't receive Christ, death is a terrible thing. Those who die not receiving Christ go to Hades and experience temporary torment until their future day of judgment. After that, they'll experience what the Bible calls the second death.

**The second death does not mean non-Christians will cease to exist, as some mistaken people believe. It means they will be transferred from Hades to the Lake of Fire, experiencing endless torment apart from Christ.**

But let me let the Bible speak for itself:      Read Revelation 20:11-15

For the Christian, death is not that big a deal, but for the person who rejects Jesus, both deaths will be awful.

Now after John got off Patmos, he went back to Ephesus and helped the seven churches. Somewhere in there he led a young man named Polycarp to the Lord and began discipling him. Sometime after John's death Polycarp became the Bishop of Smyrna. Look at what he wrote to the church at Philippi in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century:

**"Let us therefore become imitators of His endurance; and if we should suffer for His name's sake, let us glorify Him. For He gave this example in His own person, and we believed this." -Polycarp to the Philippians**

In the middle of the second century, about 60 years after John wrote the Revelation, a wave of persecution swept through the Roman Empire, and once again Smyrna was a target. Many Christians were asked to burn incense and declare that Caesar is Lord. When they refused, they were executed in a coliseum.

The pagan crowd demanded that Polycarp be brought to "justice." The Christians tried to hide Polycarp, who was now 86 years old. But he was found, and did not resist being brought before the governor. The governor said to him, "Take the oath and I will set you free: Curse Christ!"

**But Polycarp replied, "For 86 years I have been his servant, and he has never done me wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me."**

Later that day Polycarp was burned at the stake.

But if we could draw back the veil now and gaze into Heaven, Polycarp would say, “Hey folks, I died once, but it wasn’t that big a deal-look how alive I am now!”

“So it befell the blessed Polycarp...he is talked of even by the heathen in every place: for he showed himself not only a notable teacher, but also a distinguished martyr, whose martyrdom all desire to imitate, seeing that it was after the pattern of the gospel of Christ.” The letter of the Smyrnaeans (the Martyrdom of Polycarp)

Sinner’s Prayer!

END OF SERMON: THE FOLLOWING WILL NOT BE SPOKEN

**Dates Massive Persecution began in the Roman Empire:**

Nero	54
Domitian	81
Trajan	98
Hadrian	117
Marcus Aurelius	161
Severus	193
Maximum	235
Decius	249
Valerian	254
Aurelian	270
Diocletian	284

**View That Says The Seven Churches Correspond To Ages of History:**

Ephesus	Apostolic church	30-100 A.D.
Smyrna	Persecuted church	100-313 A.D.
Pergamos	State church	313-590 A.D.
Thyatira	Papal church	590-1517 A.D.
Sardis	Reformation church	1517-1730 A.D.
Philadelphia	Missionary church	1730-1900 A.D.
Laodicea	Apostate church	1900-??? A.D.