



### *Faithful through Opposition (Revelation 2:8-11)*

The seven letters in Revelation end with the refrain, "Whoever has ears to hear, listen to what the Spirit says to the churches." Although each church receives a particular instruction, we collectively learn from every one of them. Last week, we learned that we should remember the love we had when we first came to Christ and remain steadfast in loving obedience towards God and one another (Ephesus). This week we learn that we should remember that Jesus suffered faithfully and conquered death and the grave as both a model and a victor for us (Smyrna).

Approximately 40 miles north of Ephesus was the city of Smyrna. As the Christians in this city faced persecution and possible martyrdom, Jesus appeared to them as the first and the last, who became dead and was restored to life again. Jesus's resurrection is the basis for the promise that everyone who associates themselves with him by faithful allegiance will also be raised from the dead by him.

Smyrna was a leading city in the area commercially and religiously. It had a temple dedicated to the Emperor of Rome. In addition, there were temples constructed for the worship of Aphrodite, Apollo, Artemis, Cybele, Dionysus, and Zeus. There was also a large Jewish population with a prominent synagogue. They were the ones who were explicitly attacking the Christians in Smyrna. Jesus affirms the slander against them is not valid. God accepts them for their faithful allegiance to Jesus.

Lining up with instructions from the gospels and the teachings of Paul, those who believe they are honoring God with their attacks on Jesus's followers are not acting faithfully within God's will. John the Baptist warns, "And don't presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones" (Matt 3:9). Jesus exposes the hearts of his Jewish accusers with, "You are of your father the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he tells a lie, he speaks from his own nature, because he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). Paul explains, "A person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is of the heart—by the Spirit, not the letter" (Rom 2:29).

To be a Christian in the Roman empire typically meant being excluded from most opportunities to earn a living. It also included the seizure or loss of property from those who disagreed with your religious convictions. Jesus does not mention the works of the people in Smyrna. Instead, he promises "he knows" their trouble and poverty. This assessment means more than, "I am aware of your suffering." It also implies that he associates firsthand what suffering and rejection are like. Jesus is the firstborn from the dead and the faithful witness who was rejected, slandered, and ultimately murdered/martyred.

In the same way, rejection and death did not end his life, neither is it the end for everyone who aligns themselves with him in Smyrna. They will experience the same response Jesus received from their heavenly father. God vindicated Jesus and rewarded him for his faithfulness all the way to death.

In the face of their troubles, Jesus offers the same encouragement that he gave to John earlier in the letter: *Do not be afraid!* Specifically, he is encouraging them to not be *fearful of the things they are about to suffer*. The difficulty they will endure is not because they are faithless to God, and therefore he has abandoned them to their persecutors. Instead, the book of Revelation reveals that these attacks are the enemy's work who will suffer God's wrath. The book of Revelation clarifies that the primeval opponent of God, the devil, does not have any absolute power and knows that his time is short (Rev 12:12). Even to the point of death, the call to be faithful is a rallying cry for the church that we hear repeatedly beginning in Revelation 7. Therefore, everyone who has sworn allegiance to Jesus will imitate his faithfulness in the face of persecution. The book of Revelation offers a universal call to faithfulness, not a universal prediction of martyrdom since only some will suffer this fate.

The crown being offered for everyone victorious over the enemy designates the wreath or trophy given to someone who is a Victor in the games. Those who *conquer in the war* will share in the victory of Jesus and cannot be harmed by the second death, which is eternal separation from God, the trustworthy source of life.

In the book of Revelation, there is no sense that "Jesus has a wonderful plan for your life," as typically described in the American church. In short, the church at Smyrna is commended by Jesus for their faithfulness while being afflicted. Most Christians today expect that he will respond by making us prosperous and popular if we love God. Where do we expect to find happiness? Most Christians expect it in this life primarily and almost exclusively. But the Revelation reminds us that economic oppression, slander, and ostracism should be expected by Christians for remaining loyal to Jesus.

We should prepare ourselves to live faithfully amid the cultural shifts happening today. As our culture becomes increasingly post-Christian and anti-Christian, those who remain faithful to the message and the ministry of Jesus will face open hostility. As our culture becomes increasingly hostile, Jesus remains intimately close. We are not alone. Our hope looks back to Jesus, who could not be defeated, and forward to Jesus for our eternal reward. The hope that we have in Christ is not in vain, since we have a hope designed not only for this life (1 Cor 15:19) but one that is received in this life and focused on the promise of a life that is yet to come. The same guarantee has sustained generations of Jesus followers worldwide who have faced the same challenge and paid the ultimate price for their faith and will receive their eternal reward at the end of this life.

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## Discussion

1. What are specific ways you feel tempted to accommodate with our culture in order to escape slander and marginalization?
2. Why is Jesus encouraging us to "not be afraid?" Do you need to hear this expectation? Does it encourage you? Are you able to rise above your fear?
3. Who are those that threaten you? Who are you afraid of? Does the model and victory of Jesus strengthen and encourage you to remain faithful against them?
4. How has this particular lesson encouraged, strengthened, confronted, or challenged you?

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## Our Corporate Prayer

*Sovereign God and our loving heavenly Father, we need your presence in our increasingly hostile world. Thank you for knowing what we are experiencing or will be experiencing. We appreciate the model of Jesus when he suffered for his faithfulness to your plan. We admit it is still difficult to trust in you when we are afraid. Strengthen our resolve to believe in your judgment of our enemies and reward to your servants. Empower us through the Holy Spirit to remain steadfast in hope and love. In Jesus's name, Amen.*