

Smyrna: A Church Under Fire - Revelation 2:8-11  
 From the Series, Revelation - Study No. 11ID1291  
 May 4, 2011, 2011  
 By Pastor Jack Abeelen

#### MESSAGE TRANSCRIPTION

Excuse me? Yeah, you don't have to stand up here a lot, alright fine. Alright, we're going to continue on and see how we do. Anyway, which one's on now? This one's on? This one's not? Oh yeah, this one's on, okay, good. Alright, starting again...

Revelation 2, 8 through 11, rewind the tape. Anyway, as I was saying, John was in his middle to late 90's when he was exiled to Patmos by the Domitian emperor because of his faith, and they hoped to isolate him.....nah, it's cutting out Rod, I'm going to turn this off. You're going to have to turn the other one on and figure it out tomorrow. (pause) Give me a minute. One, two, three, this is (laughter). All right. I hate sound problems. Excuse me? Alright, thank you. I'll be all right in a minute.

We have spent three weeks in Chapter 1, and another two weeks right now (laughter) as John gave to us an introduction for the book, his greeting to the churches, the vision that Jesus had given him. And then last week in Chapter 2 we began the first of what would be seven letters. Seven letters that our Lord was sending to the churches beginning at the church at Ephesus which we looked at last week, Chapter 2, 1 through 7. Now we've brought weekly notes for you. If you missed a week, or you've missed a couple, they are over in the bookstore. You can pick them up over there. We usually don't keep them in the back. If you happen to find one, that's not the usual thing.

But these letters that begin the second section of the book, because the Lord had given to John the outline in Chapter 1 verse 19, write down the things that you see, and so he did in Chapter 1. Write down the things that are, the church age, Jesus writing these seven letters to share completely the heart of God for the church. The number seven representing fullness as we talked about it in our I think our second study in Chapter 1 verse 4 through 8. And then beginning in Chapter 4, those things that will be hereafter, after the church has been taken out and raptured.

The letters are important to us for lots of reasons. They are first and foremost important to us individually for our personal growth. They are certainly the only recorded words of Jesus to the church in that regard when it comes to teaching after the church has been formed. "How am I to be?" That should be your first question as you read these letters.

Second of all, it is very important that we listen to what the Lord has to say for the church. How should the church behave? What should the church pursue? Not only how does God want me to be, but secondly, what does God want us to be?

And finally, these seven letters paint for us from beginning to end a prophetic look at the church age in kind of a panoramic view. The Ephesian church being the first century church. And then moving from there forward, it really answers the questions, "what have we become?" and "what will the Lord have us to be?" Ephesus certainly in many ways exemplified the first century church. They started off pretty strong, but by the time that the you know the first century rolled near to an end, they were still busy, but they had left their first love. And so last week we spent a lot of time looking at that issue of motivation. What motivates us to serve the Lord? Great letter. Very convicting letter, very difficult

letter to read. I got a call last Thursday about 10:30 in the morning from Pastor Steve Mays. He wasn't feeling well. He said, "Would you come and teach the study at South Bay tonight." I said, "Sure, I'd love." And so I just figured I'd just take the study that we did the night before and it's just such a convicting letter. I had all these people coming up, "Oh man. You're convicting." It was convicting. It's a horrible letter to read when it comes to you know if you're heart isn't at all that really primarily interested in pleasing the Lord.

Tonight, we look at Smyrna. And if Ephesus is the first century church, Smyrna represents the church age from about 100 A.D. to 312 A.D. And the reason is, during that time persecution in the church or against the church raged from the Roman government. Ten different emperors brought the death of millions of believers. And it really wasn't until Constantine came to power that he brought a peace from persecution, but he did something far worse, he infiltrated the church with false doctrine. He said everyone should be a Christian. He made it a rule. And everyone came into the church with their ideas and doctrines and all, and so next week we will look at Pergamos, the compromised church, which began when Constantine in a prophetic sense came to power.

Having said all of those things, every type of church is found in every generation. So, that's a prophetic picture, but we want to look primarily at the application God makes to us. All seven of these churches existed in the first century. So last week, like I said, very convicting. Have you left your first love. What motivates you and what is God looking for. Your heart more than your actions.

I suspect that tonight you will be a little bit more detached from the lesson because this speaks of a church that suffers. And to be honest with you, the American church doesn't suffer much. We don't really face much difficulty. In fact, I suspect it is a position that we know very little about, at least most of us. That the idea of facing difficulty to serve the Lord is foreign. Oh, someone might make fun of you, someone might you know yell at you, someone might label you. But that's not really suffering. Suffering is when they drag you to jail and kill you for your faith. And lock you away and throw away the key. I don't think that we have seen much of that. But tonight we look at Smyrna, the persecuted church, the church that was under fire.

You know whenever we suffer, we are almost always sure that our experiences in suffering are the worst of all you know. I remember as a kid my mom would say, "You just have a cold." "No mom, not just any cold. This cold." As if somehow this was the worst one. I almost died! Were you hungry? Hungry! We were starving! We don't know what starving is probably. And that old saying that you know I complained I had no shoes until I met a man who had no feet. Doesn't really apply to us you know. We don't listen to it and somehow it just escapes us that we see our difficulties as unparalleled, but we don't really have much difficulty. The church today in America does not suffer much for Christ. And if you think that you do, you're still in that same vein of it's not the cold, it's THE cold. The one that will kill me. If you think you suffer for being a Christian, I think all you need to do is read of Smyrna's life. And Jesus' words to them are the very same words that He would say to you if you did find yourself being persecuted for His glory. If you faithfully walk for Jesus in this world or with Him, you can certainly know that things are going to get tough. You know the Bible tells us there in Timothy that if you desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus you will suffer persecution. Really no way around it. Not going to make it easy on you, you know, you don't fit in, it's a message that the world by far doesn't listen to. Jesus said to the boys as He was heading for the garden and then heading for the cross, "Look, I'm telling you these things that you might have peace in the world. You're going to have tribulation. You be of good cheer. I have overcome the world." That's God's promise to us. That's His word to us tonight.

But Smyrna was the extreme case, a place of horrible suffering for faith. The church in many places today still suffers mercilessly at the hands of wicked men. We have friends who have a series of churches in Afghanistan, and they hide most of the time. We have a friend who goes into the deserts of Iran and plants radios that transmit the gospel for six months at a time before their batteries have to be changed. And he's lived eleven years just hiding for his life. You say to him, "How're you doing?" He'll go, "I'm alive." And you think he's kidding, you know. Like we go, "Oh, I'm still alive." No, he means it. He got through another day. There are certainly places in the Mideast and in Africa and in Asia that you can and in China that you can honestly be dragged into court and be you know thrown into prison, just for your faith.

In the days of Smyrna there was a man who was three years old when his father was murdered, and he was a murderer. His mother took over the family business, remarried eventually, was murdered by the boy's stepfather with served her a dish of poison mushrooms. By the time this kid was a teenager he had committed his first murder, not his last. He killed out of anger and he was in a powerful position, no one stopped him. He killed out of spite. He killed for jealousy. He had no sorrow. No remorse. Got married at 15, killed his first wife at 16. Killed his second wife, had the husband of his third wife killed, so he could marry her. Ugly looking guy. Bowl neck, flat nose, huge eyebrows. At 31 years old he was sentenced to death by flogging and instead he ran for his life into the basement of a slave's house and he slit his own throat. Nero. And that's the guy that the Smyrna church had to deal with. This was the man in power. He gave the church a taste of what was to come. He was the first of ten consecutive persecuting Caesars who terrorized the church for almost 200 years. And Smyrna spoke of the suffering of the time and of that era and it speaks today to those who suffer for Jesus' namesake. And because of that it is a letter that I don't think we always relate to because we have it so easy. We related to Ephesus, you know, our first love, that's constant. But what would happen if we really started to step out for the Lord?

Jesus speaks to Smyrna, the church and the saints under fire for His glory. And it could be, if we you know live long enough and the Lord tarries that there could come a time when your faith could be challenged here. And that you could be in grave danger for speaking the Bible and the truths of the Bible out loud. You would not only be not politically correct, you might find yourself on the wrong end of things. But that's not the way it is today.

We'll look at this letter like we did all of the...or will all of the others and did last week. The outline is always the same. The destination is given. There is a description of Jesus that He takes from chapter 1 that relates to the message He wants to give, part of His glory. He then introduces Himself that way as the writer. He gives them commendations sometimes. It is followed by rebuke or exhortation sometimes. And finally, there is a warning or a promise.

So we read in verse 8, "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write," the angel being the *aggelos*, the pastor, the overseer, Chapter 1 verse 20. To the pastor in charge of a church that was really suffering. This says, "These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and who has come to life." Now, Smyrna was a church located about 35 miles or so north of Ephesus, and it was really the competitive city as far as beauty and commerce. It was a seaport town. It was named in the first century, the beauty and ornament of Asia. It was a beautiful place. There...the Jews lived there by the thousands. The town was filled with pagan worship. And history tells us a lot about the place. You can go and find out lots about first century Smyrna. At the end of one of their main streets they had the temple of Zeus on the street of Gold. On the other end of that same street the temple of Sybille(?), the mother of the gods. In the middle, the temple of Apollos. And since Smyrna was the center of emperor worship, they

also had the temple of emperor Tiberius standing prominently in town. And it is that place that God put His people.

Through the Scriptures we discover that Smyrna was a place that probably Ephesus planted because we don't really have a history of who might have gone there or even be able to track that in the early church, but I think the natural guess would be 35 miles away from Ephesus and being such a large church and people going out from there in all directions, it was probably an Ephesian church plant. The place Ephesus, Kütahya (kud-AH-see) today in Turkey, lies in ruins. The city of Smyrna today is called Izmir. It's a Muslim name. It is the second largest port city after Istanbul today in Turkey. Three and a half million people live here. So this place still exists. The name itself Smyrna means "myrrh" or "bitterness." It is one of these very sweet perfumes that they used to embalm the dead, but in order for myrrh to be smelled or to let go of its fragrance, it has to be crushed. And then you get this beautiful aroma. But it isn't just that way until it is crushed. You remember that Jesus was given this gift by one of the wise men who came to Him prophetically a year or so after His birth when the wise men came and they brought you know the gifts. But one of them, the myrrh was to signify the death that He was going to die, but Him being crushed He would bring life to all. Beautiful picture.

If you look in Isaiah Chapter 60 at the Second Coming of the Lord when again men will gather to give Him gifts, there'll be the gold, there'll be the incense or the frankincense of worship, the gold of royalty, there will be no myrrh. There'll be none of that because there's no more suffering. The gifts that He will be given when He returns is the royalty His place as King, and the worship that He deserves. Smyrna is the suffering church that is facing tribulation and martyrdom for their faith, and it becomes a very difficult thing for us to relate to I think. No matter how hard you try, I don't think you can bring this on yourself.

The description that Jesus uses of Himself in the introduction here "the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life," is that description from that vision that John had been given in Chapter 1, but it does line up with Smyrna's experience with suffering because Jesus, He triumphed over suffering and death. They could triumph as well. At the end of verse 10 you will read the words, "Be faithful to death. I'll give you a crown of life." So, because Jesus was crushed, the First and the Last, dead but came to life. That's our hope right? I mean that is our hope. The fact that He went before us is the glory of God for us. I am the resurrection and the life, Jesus said. If you believe in Me, even if you die, you're going to live. If you live and believe in Me, you'll never die. You won't see death the same way. And then You remember He said that to Martha when Lazarus had died. "Martha, do you believe that? Who I am." Pointing to Himself. There in John Chapter 14 Jesus said, "I'll only be with you a little longer and then the world won't see Me anymore, but you'll see Me, and because I live you're going to live too."

So to the Smyrna church that was honestly in danger of their life, day in and day out for going to fellowship for hanging out with Jesus, for preaching the gospel, the Lord says to them, "I'm the First and the Last. I was dead, now I'm alive." In other words, here's my hope. It's a letter from the Lord who went before them. The devil can destroy your body, but he can't do anymore to you than that. Matthew I think Chapter 10, doesn't it say that? "Don't fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell."

Well, then the commendation, verse 9. "I know your works, your tribulation, your poverty, (but you're rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews, they're not, they are the synagogue of Satan." Now these little four words "I know your works," we spent quite a bit of time at last week with the Ephesian church, but every letter gets this preface at the beginning of the Lord's comments. I know

your works. Every letter. Every time the Lord goes to speak, He goes, "I know all about you." And I think it's to remind us to never forget that. Right? That the Lord knows all about us. Some people around us don't really know what we're like. Maybe you try to hid a portion of yourself sometimes. But the Lord knows all about you. And these can either be words of great comfort if you're hearing this from the Lord, or of great terror. Just depends what kinds of works you've been doing. What you've been up to. Jesus knew their faithful service despite that fact that their faithfulness had brought tremendous persecution and poverty to their life. And it comforts me to know that God knows not only my heart, but God keeps great records when it comes to your sacrifice for His name. I know that sometimes when you go out of your way to serve the Lord, no one notices. You know, and you say to yourself, "Man, that was a lot of work. I wish..no one said thank you, no one seemed to care, no one even noticed." That's all right. The Lord keeps great track. In fact, if everyone ran over and went, (Pastor Jack slowly clapping his hands while speaking) "Wow, you're awesome," listen to that very carefully (clapping) cause that's all you're getting you know? I'd rather the Lord write it down wouldn't you? I know your works. I know what you're going through. And sometimes when you feel no one appreciates you or doesn't know what you had to go through to be faithful, God does. You know, the wife that has to contend with an unbelieving husband, but she wants to stay put and be that light and let the Lord use her. No one knows what she's going through, but the Lord does. You know, the travail that you suffer with your children when you put the your foot down say, "Look, we can't tolerate this in our house. You can't live that kind of lifestyle here. You're going to have to...you're going to have to go." And it hurts, and it's difficult, but you do it to serve the Lord. And nobody knows, but He knows. He knows what you're facing. No one else might. And for Him to say to this very you know under the gun kind of fellowship, "I know what you're going through," that would mean the world to me you know? To remember that and to know that and to be sure of that, that God knows all. That no suffering or sacrifice is missed.

This is a wonderful letter because although, like I said it's distant from us by experience, there is absolutely no criticism or condemnation or correction found here. One of the things about difficulty and persecution for your faith, it usually chases off everyone that's living on the fence. You know, you can't mess around when it can mean your life. You can all come to church when you're raffling off a bike you know? "Oh, praise Jesus. Is it G-11? That's my seat number." You know, we can all come hang out when I got nothing to do and there's a free night out and they're feeding us afterwards you know? But when death awaits you, it there's nothing to be found in the fellowship any longer that offends the Lord. Nothing that He corrects, oh, you know, if you just fix that....those people have long gone you know. They're long gone. And the Lord in commending these folks doesn't have a word of judgment, not like the Pergamos church which is next which has all kinds of problems. Because now everyone's welcome, we're all Christians, that's what Constantine said. "Bring it in. " Bring the saints, bring the statues, bring the cross, bring the kneelers, bring the incense, bring the funny hats, bring the long clothes. Let's have it all! And then let's mix it up and see what comes out. Oh, the Lord had all kinds of things to say to Pergamos. Nothing problem here. These people were either...either you were for the Lord, or you're not showing up here. It's a dangerous place. This..the church was a dangerous place to hang out.

I know your tribulation. I know your poverty. God is greatly aware of what we suffer. And you should know that. If you had to give something up because you wanted to serve the Lord, God's aware of it. If you've lost someone in your life because you weren't willing to compromise your faith, God's aware of it. If something was taken from you because Jesus is your Lord, He's written it down. God knows about it all.

Politically, the Smyrna was church was suffering at the hands of the Romans. The Romans enjoyed feeding Christians to the lions. Tying them down between wild dogs. Boiling them in hot oil. None of

that sounds very appealing. And I've never been asked to put my faith on the line, was it Jesus or the dogs. Never. Polycarp who was a disciple of John and for some time spent time there ministering in Ephesus became the bishop of Smyrna who was burned at the stake in the middle of the second century. He had been personally disciplined by John. He had been appointed bishop while he was only in his early 20's. The guy was just an on fire dude. Tertullian, Ireneus, the early church writers wrote of him that the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church and the suffering in Smyrna has led to the salvation of countless thousands. It didn't turn people away. It reached folks with the gospel. The night before Polycarp was to be killed he had a dream of being burned at the stake. And he shared it the next morning with the disciples, and when the Roman centurion came to take him he said to him, "Look, if you'll just deny Jesus you don't have to die. All you have to do is honor Caesar." And he said, "Look, for 86 years I've served my King, He has been faithful to me, He hasn't let me down. I can't deny Him now. You're going to threaten me with fire that burns for less than an hour. You reject Jesus, you'll be in fire that will never end." And they threw him in the fire pit and they offered to tie him to keep him there, and he refused. He said, "No no no, I'll stand here on my own accord." And they lit the wood and the fire moved away from him, rather than towards him. And finally a Roman stuck his spear in his heart, and the blood flowed out of his body and put out the fire. I mean, this is the kind of people that were living in Smyrna. Tough Christians you know. Guys that you don't mess around with. That didn't need to say to you, "Are you praying today?" Oh, no no they were praying. "Been reading your Bible?" "You bet I have! Memorized the whole book of James today. I just need stuff, you know, in my life."

Imagine coming to church tonight and wondering if you'll get to your car before the authorities haul you away. How would that be? Would you still come? Seriously. "No, the pastors should all meet and pray for us." How many of you would have reasoned otherwise? And rightfully so, we haven't faced this kind of difficulty, so we haven't needed that kind of strength. I know your tribulation, grossly unfair, often unbearable, and yet they persevered for they loved Jesus more than their own lives. That was their political situation.

Economically, they suffered great loss for their faith. You walk with Jesus, you don't work here. You weren't hired. Your goods were seized. The word for poverty here is that Greek word for abject poverty, the kind that you don't have you know enough to your name to have a name. How did they get so poor? Well, according to history, Rome actually offered a ten percent reward to anyone turning in someone practicing Christianity. And the rat would then receive ten percent of all that that person who was being betrayed possessed. You can read about it in Hebrews Chapter 10, Paul said to those that he was writing to, you have had compassion on me in my chains and you have joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods knowing you have a better and more enduring possession for yourself in heaven. It wasn't just a Smyrna problem. It was a problem for the Jews who had been converted to Christ in Rome. Tremendous difficulty. And if you didn't repent, and if you didn't turn, they would take your stuff, they would take advantage of you. You would be left with nothing. So now, not only is your life in danger, but all that you count dear, all that God has blessed you with, all that you use for yourself and your family, just hauled off by someone else just because they're stronger than you are. And they don't believe in your faith.

Religiously, many in the Jewish community were used of the enemy to blaspheme the church and to work to see them destroyed. You know that wherever Paul went, they stirred up persecution against him. They claimed to be worshipers of God, but.....Jesus corrects them and says in reality they're from the synagogue of Satan. That's a.....tough sentence to read isn't it. Paul would write to the Romans in Chapter 2, you're not a Jew if you're one outwardly, anymore than circumcision is an outward work of the flesh, but you're a Jew if you're inwardly and the circumcision is of the heart and in the spirit and

your praise is not from men but it comes from God. Jesus said there in Matthew 3, "Do not say to Me we have Abraham as our father. God can raise up children of Abraham from stones." Later on to the Philadelphian church in Chapter 3 verse 9, the Lord says to the Philadelphian church, "I will make those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews but they're not, they're liars--indeed I'll make them come and worship before your feet, to know that I have loved you." So, it is certainly true that Smyrna faced its greatest persecution from religious people who opposed the truth of God's word. And that's always, unfortunately the church's problem. You know, the Smyrna saints found few friends amongst the religion, or the religious in town. And the Lord said, I know the oppression that you're facing. I know the affliction that you face. But by application, as long as Christians were seen as a Jewish sect, which was for quite some time, the Romans protected the church. And you can read evidence of that as we've been going through the book of Acts that the Romans actually stepped up to protect the church because they just saw it as an extension of Judaism, meeting in the synagogue, following many of the same practices. Eventually that veneer wore thin, and that's when the persecution began in earnest.

And so the Lord says, I know your works, I know your tribulation. And this word tribulation is a word that speaks of pressure from without. One thing you wouldn't be wearing in Smyrna was a witness shirt. You wouldn't be carrying your Bible in your hand in public. You couldn't pull it off. I have tried over the years on the temple mount, which is run by the Moslems, although there is a Jewish presence, to take my Bible there and have been chastised for it. I tried getting it in one time saying, "Well, this is just a history book." They weren't buying that either. And our Jewish guide, and I said, "Look, I thought this was Israel. How come I can't take a Bible up here?" He goes, "All right, you can take a Bible. We'll call the soldiers. You can bring the Bible. But I can't guarantee you're going to get out of the country alive." I said, "Well, we can leave the Bible. I pretty well know the verses, you know." (laughter)

It is really easy here in the good old U.S.A. And the world may never know what it costs you to follow the Lord, but God does. And we may never realize how hard it can be to serve the Lord. But I'll tell you what, persecution from without has never hurt the church. It's only made it stronger. Corruption from within has destroyed it every time. Semi-quasi-religious people having some affiliation without a heart for God. You know, slipping into the church. The wheat and then the tares among the wheat. That's the issue. But certainly no issue from outside pressure. The church in China today is thriving. We have family through my son's family in China as missionaries. And they adopted a little girl here recently that's extremely sick. And the government basically said, "Well, it's a girl, you know, we don't really spend money for that." And so we've been working with my son just to raise some money to get this girl a surgery that she needs. But the church thrives. You know, the house churches by the thousands meet underground. Not the state-sponsored church which can only say so much, but the people who love the Lord. Pressure and persecution makes for an extremely strong body of believers. The Lord was aware of it. And the Lord said, "I know what you're doing. I know how much you're suffering from without. I know what you've lost. Your poverty, to where you really have nothing of your own." And then He said, "But you're rich." Only the Lord could say that and you could agree with Him, right? He saw them as rich though they had virtually lost everything in this life. Rich because they were headed for eternity, right? Rich because eternal rewards were theirs. It really is a matter of perspective isn't it.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians chapter 8, he said, "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that through His poverty you might become rich." To the Lord's way of looking at things, whatever you lose in this life for Him, you gain so much more don't you? I mean you could own a mansion and have a boat and a car and an airplane, all of those things will be rotting away tonight as you sit here. Aramakasis(?), remember that study from Sunday morning? It's all rotting away. Eternal things are stored in heaven. Moth doesn't get

to them. Rust doesn't get to them. The robber doesn't get to them. They last. And the Lord looked at this suffering church and He said, "You're rich. You're rich." You're rich in God's favor. You're rich in God's love. You're rich in God's testimony. You're rich in lasting fruit. When Paul wrote to the Ephesians in Chapter 3, he described the gospel as the unsearchable riches of Christ. Good that we know that at the church, you know. Sometimes, you know, well, especially in America where the whole health and wealth doctrine has been preached for so many years, you know, follow Jesus, get rich. As if somehow those two go together. Well, they do, but not the way they're teaching it. You come to Jesus, you're rich. You may not have a lot in this world, but you're going to have plenty in the world to come. And they were rich indeed.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians, "I'm sorrowful yet I'm always rejoicing. I'm poor and yet I am making many rich. I have nothing, and yet I possess all things." You got to love the perspective. And to the Smyrna church the Lord said, "I know, I know, I know what it is costing you, but trust Me, you have everything you'll ever need." James would write in Chapter 2, "Listen, my beloved brethren, has not God chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith, and to be heirs of the kingdom which He's promised to those who love Him." If you looked at the Smyrna church in an outward sense, you couldn't accurately judge them. Because you would say of them, they look frightened, they have nothing, they're the, you know, the scour of the society. Who would want to join them? You really couldn't make an understandable evaluation of them on an outward sense because this was a people that were laying up all of their treasure in heaven. There is one who makes himself rich, and yet has nothing, you read in Proverbs. There is one who makes himself poor, and yet has great riches. Isn't that something? How God views life so different than what we do. Many, you know, of us we think somehow that God's blessing and material goods go together. But ultimately every material good you own is going to die, it's going to be destroyed. You're going to leave it behind. The things that Smyrna was rich in lasted forever. And if you know that kind of stuff, as a church, you're priorities change, you know. You find yourself wanting to invest more in eternal things cause they last. We're real good at like shopping for things that we want to last you know. We spend you know millions of dollars doing analysis of products. You know Consumer Reports' business is telling you what dryer is better than the other. This one will last two years. This one will last five years. I'm getting that one! That's five years! And the Lord comes along and goes, "Here's an eternal life. This one's going to go corrupt." "Yeah, it's a tough decision." It is not! a tough decision. And for Smyrna it was even easier cause they didn't have anything. You know when Peter came along and said look the Day of the Lord is coming as a thief in the night, and the heavens are going to pass away with a great noise and the elements are going to burn up with fervent heat, and the earth and the works in it are going to be burned up. And then Peter says, "Therefore, seeing that all of these things are going to be dissolved, what person or what kind of persons ought we to be in holy conduct and godliness." If you know that, how're you going to live? What's going to possess you? And the good thing for Smyrna is they were rich, they didn't have the material wealth or the worldly advantages. They had invisible only discernible by spiritual eyes, true spiritual riches, and so do you. And if you could see yourself tonight as a Christian in God's eyes, you're rich. You're rich. "I'm struggling." Might be. You're rich. You are absolutely going to have those things that will last forever.

When we get down in a few weeks to the Laodiceans in verse 17, the Laodiceans got no really good word from the Lord at all. There was just trouble there. But one of their problems was they really thought they were rich. In Chapter 3 verse 17 you can read of them. I'm rich! I have need of nothing. And the Lord says, "Wait, don't you know you're wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked. Now were they any of those things physically? No! They were able to say, "I'm rich" cause they were. But they had nothing before the Lord, and the Lord said, you know, use these kind of words, "rich" versus "wretched," "poor," "blind," "naked." You should come to Me and I can give you some real

riches. We may feel we see it clearly, but this is how God sees it. And that's what matters. And He saw these Smyrna church members as rich. He looked at the Laodiceans who were very successful in the world, called them impoverished. So you might tell that to the faith movement folks the next time they question your faith in God, because they don't like to read the whole Bible, just the part that gets them rich.

The reality of a true believer practicing his faith and being persecuted for it as far as our experience is rare. Because we have such freedom to worship here. The problem with the freedom is, there's no pressure. So we get mixed together with people that have very little commitment to the Lord at all, and we start to set the standard lower and lower as far as what commitment really means, and what we'll really do for the Lord, how much we'll really give, how far we'll really go. And we find ourselves reduced, if you will, and yet if you go to other countries that are actively pursuing and persecuting saints, you find that there's a real refinement process. You know, in Acts Chapter 5 where Peter and John and the other apostles were told never to preach anymore, they said, "Yeah, well we're going to have to obey God rather than man." And when the persecution began, the Bible tells us that no one dared join themselves to the apostles. There wasn't a flippant kind of attitude towards the church. To belong to the church meant that you might very well catch some difficulty. You know, for us the conflict is not extreme. Your life's not in danger, you know. Maybe they go after your reputation. Maybe your integrity at work costs you a job. Maybe your refusal to join in the party life will isolate you from some of your friends. That's hardly suffering. That's just good business on your side, you know. That's just wise living. But, you know, maybe they look at you as a lunatic. I went to my ten-year anniversary as a pastor from high school, and I was a pretty good party guy, you know, I'd always have something in the car. And they came, "Hey! How ya doin' man!" And I go, "Hey!" I had a Bible with me, I shared with them. I honestly didn't last 15 minutes. (laughter) Hundreds of people, 15 minutes. The word got out. No one came and talked to me, and I went home an hour later. That was it. That was my big suffering. I'm sure the Lord didn't write that down. That's ridiculous. (laughter)

Maybe they think you're a religious nut. But hey, be encouraged. God knows. Just ask the Smyrna saints. In Smyrna you faced physical death. You face spiritual death. They faced physical death and so they were alive spiritually. You have no pressures so your danger is spiritually dying. Just kind of dying on the vine you know. But Jesus knows what we face, and He's going to reward accordingly. Blessed are you when you are persecuted for righteousness' sake for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you, say all evil against you falsely for my sake. You rejoice. You be exceedingly glad. Great is your reward in heaven. That's how they persecuted the prophets who went before you. That's great on paper. It is awfully difficult in life. "Praise the Lord I'm being persecuted! Oh, I'm rejoicing that they hate my guts. They think I'm an idiot. They don't want to talk to me. They want nothing to do with me. Oh thank the Lord!" We suffer harsh words from people. They Smyrna suffered life and limb. We suffer misrepresentation in the media. They were forced to decide whether they believed in the Lord enough to lay their life down. We can, today, simply decide if we'll commit our ways to the Lord without much outward repercussions. For them it would cost them their life.

So, Jesus' words are to the suffering. And to the extent that you suffer in serving Him, the words are to you. I know your works. I know the pressure from without. I know it has left you with nothing in this life, but you're rich. And I know the blasphemy of those who say they're Jews--they're not. I know the blasphemy of those who slander unfairly who pretend to be godly in their hatred, but they're not godly at all. And Jesus' words to this church ought to be a real encouragement if you've been rebuked or criticized or mocked or slandered or misrepresented by religious people because of your faith in Christ.

Here, the blasphemy is the critical attitude towards the saints from people who claim to divine standing with God and didn't have it. Jesus said, "they claim they're Jews--they're not." Because He knows who they are. These are folks who claimed religious, you know, superiority and they didn't have it. And the Lord said, "I'll deal with the synagogue of Satan," which is a pretty apt description of religious hatred carried out in the name of the Lord. And this comes from Jesus' mouth. The disciples didn't write this, you know. They didn't come up with this. The Lord did. I know what you are facing when it comes to the blasphemy, the evil speaking of God and of your faith in Him from religious people. And I think that for us over the years the greatest persecution that we as a church have seen have come from religious people, you know, who don't like your faith in God. And so they want to criticize it. Or somehow isolate you. I actually had a fella say to me, "Did you graduate from seminary?" And I said, "No." And he said, "Yeah, I thought so." And I thought, "Alright, I don't care," you know. I'd rather be Peter than Paul most of the time anyway. I relate to him better you know.

But you get that kind of stuff, you know, the superiority of the religious man. And yet I'm filled with joy, and he's freaking out, you know. And I know where I'm headed, and he's not so sure. And I see people gathering every week who love Jesus, and he doesn't. So, you know, yell away man. Big deal. I know the blasphemy of those who you've had to suffer from.

Verse 10. "Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer." Now, if I was in Smyrna, this would scare me a bit. You mean this isn't bad enough yet? Oh no. You know, the only exhortation is found here, and they along with the church of Philadelphia are the only two churches that get a letter without a rebuke or a correction. Don't fear any of the things you are **about** to suffer. The present persecution in Smyrna was just a forerunner of what was yet to come. Satanic opposition would continue. Soon folks would be killed in wholesale numbers. The old issue of bow down to Caesar or die didn't take long to develop. If you've been to Rome, the Coliseum stones are stained with the blood of the martyrs. Though, if you have a Catholic guide, he will tell you that that's a myth, no Christians were ever killed here. Revisionist history doesn't really change the truth.

Notice that Jesus said Satan was behind it all. I know that you shouldn't fear any...or do not fear any of those things which you're about to suffer. Indeed the devil is about to throw some of you into prison. You're going to be tested. You're going to have tribulation for ten days. But you be faithful to death, I'll give you a crown of life. Jesus said the devil was behind it all. The accuser of the brethren, Revelation 12:10. The one with whom we have warfare. And I think it's invaluable that when you suffer persecution you don't personalize it to people. You just see it as spiritual, you know. The enemy wants disruption and dissension and pain. He wants wicked influence, and much of the struggles we face as we seek to serve the Lord comes from Satan. We need the armor of God. We need to stand in faith and trust and believe in Him. Do not fear. And I suspect He said that because that's what they were doing. There's a natural fear that we all have from suffering. We don't want it. You know if we could shrink away from it, we will. But God is very good. People say, "I don't know if I could handle that." My answer to them is always the same, "If you know the Lord, when God puts you there you'll be able to handle it." But grace is something that you get for the moment. You don't get it to like put it in your back pocket in case you need it. There's no like you know first-aid kit of grace. God says, for as your day goes, that's how your strength will be. And He assured them that He knew what was coming and things were not out of His control, and you'll have it when you need it. But God has a way of setting limits on the devil doesn't He? With Job, he wanted to destroy Job, and the Lord says, "No, you can do this, but you can't do that. You can go this far, but you can't go any further." And He had you know He had him on a leash. Paul said to the Corinthians the same thing you know, that Satan is on a leash. No temptation has overtaken you except which is common to man, and God is faithful, He will not allow

you to be tempted beyond what you're able to bear. And I know you argue with that sometimes. "It's more than I can handle!" The Lord says, "No, it's not." "No, it is. Ask me." But He'll provide a way of escape so you'll be able to wear it. Paul.....bear it....not wear it.

Paul said to the Corinthians Chapter 12 I think 2 Corinthians, "My grace," the Lord said to Paul, "is sufficient for you. My strength is made perfect in your weakness." So, Paul and the church have learned to rely on the Lord, but don't fear, I know what's going on, but I want you to know who's behind it. And the devil is about to throw some of you in prison. The devil certainly brings persecution to the church. It is warfare, and one of the things that we always tell our pastors is, "You know, when you step out to get in ministry, and even the elders and all, you will oftentimes find that all of a sudden you have battles you didn't ever remember having. What in the world is going on here? Life used to be so easy. And now I'm, you know, showing up to pray and I'm showing up to be an usher and I'm going to sing in the choir, I'm going to serve the Lord, and man! now you got all kinds of problems. Well, it's because you're causing problems. The devil didn't care much about you while you're sitting on your backside in the back, you know? "Hey, yeah." He'll leave you alone. But try to step out. The devil's about to throw some of you in prison. And fear comes when we have to personally pay the price for our walk by faith. And sometimes seeing how much we have to pay for live for Jesus can be very hard. And I suspect that's why sometimes believers stay silent when they should speak and act when they should speak out. Because we're worried about the repercussions, you know, and we like to retreat to the comfort zone so that no one knows of our faith in Jesus. But the Bible calls that something else. It calls that world-liness, and that's not good.

So we read here in verse 10, he's about to throw some of you in prison, and then and the words "that you may be tested." Now you should notice those because suffering when it comes to you and the Lord, God will allow testing even allowing Satan to be the instrument through which you're tested for the purpose of bringing you forth stronger. Not to test you to say, "See? I knew you were weak." He knows that. But to try you or test you in the sense of bringing strengthening into your life. Job said at one time in Job 23, "He knows the way that I should take, and when He has tested me, I'm going to come forth like gold." How do you grow? You grow under pressure, right? How do we get you to pray more? The Lord gives you more reasons to have to pray. Right? You're praying 20 minutes a week because that's about all the time you have, and that's all you really need, you know, "Lord, open up the freeway, in Jesus' name. Thank You God! Yeah! Lord, give me a raise at work. Amen! Get me out of the Saturday detention. Oh, right!" And then pressure comes, and you go, "Oh, Lord, change my life! Change my heart!" God tests us. We need it because we're not good at doing it on our own.

Peter wrote in his letter, you should greatly rejoice, even for a little while if now you've been grieved by various trials so that the genuineness of your faith much more precious than the gold that perishes can be tested in the fire and be found of the praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. God's going to test you. He's going to allow the enemy to do that because the devil works for God. See, he's not smart enough to realize that. He thinks he's getting away with murder. What he doesn't realize is he's like a dog on a leash. "Okay, get...there you go....and then, that's one's going to stay behind the light, 'ruff,' there you go. That one's going to be alright." Helps me to grow. That you may be tested. Even if the trials originate with the devil in response to our walks by faith, God allows it for our benefit to separate the chaff from the wheat. You know persecution drove the early church out of Jerusalem. If you go back and read the book of Acts, which we've been doing on Sunday nights, everyone stayed in Jerusalem. The Lord said, "Go into all the world," and they went, "Hey, man, we like it here. Everybody's hanging out here. " And then Stephen gets killed, everyone runs for their life. And the Lord goes, "Ah, that's better." You know, now I got people in Samaria. Now I got people up in the north.

Now I got people going down South. Now I got people going to the East. Oh, this is better. Persecution drove the church out. The granary to the world.

So Jesus gives them two exhortations here. First, stop being afraid for nothing is going to rob you of the priceless eternal blessings that God has. Nothing is going to take that from you. God has that for you. You won't lose that if you will. And secondly, stay faithful unto death and I'll give you a crown of life.

Now, for some folks in Smyrna, their deliverance would come with their death. "Oh, Lord, deliver me." "Alright," and you die. In fact, millions would die. Estimated seven million Christians in 212 years. Be fearless and be faithful. A message, I think, that we can take to our hearts even if we're not under a lot of pressure. Be fearless, be faithful, because a pagan society will often seek to silence Christians and their witnessing and that shouldn't happen.

Faithful unto death. The greatest need of our day is, I think personally, is a deepened sense of commitment and loyalty to Christ in our churches. That we need not compromise, but we need people who feel like they'll give it all up so that Jesus might be glorified. It's hard to be faithful unto death when you're not faithful in life. I thought about Acts Chapter 12 today, you know, Peter and James were both arrested by Herod, and James get beheaded. "Lord, deliver me." "Alright." And James goes home to be with the Lord. Peter is left on death row to be executed after the feast days, so for a week he has to sit there and to, "Man, I heard James there in the courtyard, and then whiiish, and the cheering crowds, you know, and I'm next." And yet you find Peter in the book of Acts sleeping so soundly on the night of his...before his execution that the angel of the Lord sent to deliver him has to kick him to wake him up. That's a guy who's fearless and faithful. Right?

Then we read this, and I want you to take a look at it, cause it's one of those similes now, you will have tribulation for ten days, and you say to yourself, "well, what does that mean?" Let me give you a couple of things to think about because we do want to let the Bible teach the Bible. Whenever you find this little phrase "ten days" used in the Scriptures, it is almost always used to denote a short amount of time. Not necessarily a physical count...day 8, day 9, day 10. But it's almost a colloquial phrase that says, "it won't be long." You know, it's a matter of days we say sometimes. That kind of a phraseology. In Genesis 24, in verse 55 we read, "but her brother and her mother said let the young woman stay with us a few days, at least ten, then she can go." It really wasn't much, just give us a little time. In Nehemiah Chapter 5 when it spoke about his governorship, Nehemiah's, we read that "that which was prepared daily was an ox and six sheep, a fowl were prepared for me, and once every ten days an abundance of wine, and in spite of that I didn't demand my governor's provision." In Daniel Chapter 2, sorry, Chapter 1 verse 12 it was Daniel who, you remember, said to the caretaker when he was taken into custody there in Babylon, "Look, we'd like to eat kosher food." And the guy went, "You're all gonna die!" you know, "and I'm gonna get killed if I don't keep you healthy." And Daniel said, "Look, let's try this for ten days. Just try this for just the little while. Give us some vegetables to eat and some water to drink, and then I think it'll be good," you know.

In Acts Chapter 25 verse 6, "and when he had remained among them for ten more days, he went down to Caesarea." Cause they said him, "Stay a little while." And so he stays ten days. So it is used by the use to indicate a short amount of time. And Jesus as our example, suffered for a time, and now He's in glory. That's one possible application.

Prophetically, there were ten waves of Roman persecution under ten Roman butchers that were to come from a prophetic standpoint in a general picture. These butchers that killed nearly seven million

Christians. Could that be the reference? I don't know. You'd have to have a historical perspective and be able to reference it. Both of them fit. Neither one of them, I think, add or subtract to the Scriptures. I'll just leave that with you. But needless to say, He said to the Smyrna, "It's going to get worse. I know who's behind it. I don't want you to be afraid. You're not going to lose your reward. I'm going to keep you through it, and you can be faithful to death, and I'm going to give to you a crown of life. You're rich. You're going places." Promised to those faithful to death. Eternal life will offset any darkness in your present circumstance, that's for sure. If we endure, Paul said to Timothy, we shall also reign with Him. If we deny Him, He'll deny us. He said to the Romans, "I consider that this present suffering is just not worthy to be compared with the things that we shall see, or the glory that shall be revealed in us." So, that's why we're told not to fear death, for the future's secure and extremely bright.

There's a lot of crowns in the Bible, by the way. Notice we read here "crown of life." There's a crown of righteousness given to those who live godly lives in 2 Timothy Chapter 4. There's a crown of glory to those who would be faithful pastors in 1 Peter 5. There's a crown of gold evidencing our redemption and we'll discover that in Revelation 4. There's a crown of rejoicing, 1 Thessalonians Chapter 2. There's an incorruptible crown. But you get all of them after you die. And they each speak of victory. And I suspect, from at least what I read in the Scriptures, that when you get there and you get all those crowns in the worship of Jesus you're going to take them all off and throw them right at His feet and thank Him for getting you there. Paul sure looked forward to his didn't he in 2 Timothy Chapter 4 there.

Okay, finally, we read in verse 11, "If you have an ear, let him hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches," plural, all of them, "and if you overcome, you will not be hurt by the second death." Again, the promise is apropos for the things that the church was facing. Jesus at every time and every letter says to the individual saints, "Are you listening?" So let me say this to you tonight, "What did the Lord say to **you** tonight through the letter to the church in Smyrna? What did He say to **you**?" What are you hearing from Him? What is the Spirit saying to you? If you overcome this world, and you can face a lot in this world--tribulation, and even martyrdom, but look, they can only kill you once. Revelation Chapter 20 verse 6 says, "Blessed and holy is He that has a part in the first resurrection, over such the second death has no power." We will reign and rule with Him a thousand years. It's alright to leave this life, just don't miss the one to come. That's the issue isn't it? So the flip side of the crown of life is eternal judgment.

Alright, let's quickly review. I know we're running late here. Let's see if I can do that. The believers in Smyrna were facing intense, crushing persecution, the name Smyrna. Through it all they were emitting the fragrance of Jesus. Hebrews Chapter 11 writes about of whom the world was not worthy. Poor as they were, spiritually rich in God's eyes. And because of their faithful commitment to Jesus, this church was going to make it. They were going to succeed. I think that we need to be prepared for the hostility of the world as we seek to live for Christ. The Bible says, as much as lies in you, get along with all men. Look, you don't have to go stir up trouble. But eventually your walking with Jesus might find you.

The message here to the church assures them that Jesus knows their struggles, that Jesus is in charge, that His promises are for each one of them. The difficulty has chased off the poseurs. I think that's great. You know, the problem we face in America is there's no difficulty so there's lots of poseurs. In this church you could not have been complacent. You could not have been complacent. Only the fervent remained. And in most of the churches there are plenty of folks sitting amongst the wheat.

Like I said, tribulation has historically never hurt the church. Internal division, absolutely destroyed it. Lack of love, lack of holiness within, but pressure from without, it's only purified. I think you might

remember the story that Corrie ten Boom told years ago. But I remember her telling it at Costa Mesa Calvary one night when we were there that she was in a believer's meeting in Russia when two Russian soldiers kicked the door down with their guns and they said, "You have five minutes to renounce Christ, or we kill you." And three or four guys got up and left, but the rest of the folks just sat there and they didn't say a word. The five minutes ran out, and the two Russian soldiers said, "Oh good! We're looking for the real church." And then they came in and prayed with them. They were on the run. So, you know, we're the believers. We want to join with other real saints. And we have to hear God's word. Are you listening to Him? And it is certainly worth meditating upon. Because we're not the church under fire. But we might be. And there's certainly lots of folks around the country and around the world that we need to pray for that are. Who don't have it like you have it tonight. They're barely able to get five people together, and they're in danger for their life.

Next week we'll look at Pergamos, not exactly the same story.

Father, thank You that You gave us the convicting word from Ephesus and then this warning from Smyrna before getting into the conviction of Pergamos next week. And though we probably can't relate, Lord, much to the difficulty and the hardships that were found facing this church as they sought to live their lives for you and in this very wicked city filled with idolaters and angry men and those in power who had hatred and death upon their minds, we certainly realize, Lord, that You told all of us that we're going to have tribulation in the world. And may we not shy away from what might come from just loving You. And may we not somehow compromise what we do know so that we would be better liked or more welcomed or whatever it is the benefit we think we're going to find, but that we would love You first. Not looking to make trouble. Not looking to stir it up. Looking to be good witnesses, but at the same time, not ashamed of our Lord. Father, that You might be with the brothers and sisters around the world that tonight lay their head down on pillows with fear, that hide themselves in alleyways and in houses with windows that are closed and curtains drawn in the hopes that You will allow them another day to worship and to serve and to reach out. Protect the church, Lord, from the world. Give them strength, especially those who serve in such difficult places. I think of Bruce Doherty who has left his very successful surgery practice in Lake Tahoe to move to Mexico and live amongst the Indians there in a very dangerous drug cartel area so he might serve you. May You be with those folks and others who are risking their lives tonight for the sake of the gospel. And Lord since we don't have to risk our lives most of the time, may we at least give our life to You.

If tonight you find yourself compromised, I guess it's good that you're here so that the Lord could shake you back into reality. We need to live for Him. He gave His all so that we could have life. He's not asking for much. Just faithfulness and diligence and commitment. And that you be aware of the fact that, you know, the church for the most part does not live like the church in America does. It's not this easy. But because we have it so easy, we've got to be all the more diligent to give Him our all. If you need prayer tonight, if you don't know the Lord, you'd like to know what it means to give Jesus your life and be saved, which you have to be to go to heaven, then talk to one of the pastors up front tonight, come and let them give you some Scriptures to go home with and think about.

May the Lord bless you guys and give you great boldness by His Spirit. And may the world see in you His love. Shall we stand.

**End of message**