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To the Church in Smyrna

Revelation 2:8-11

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St. John's second letter sees us travelling up the road, about fifty kilometres north of Ephesus to the city of Smyrna. Ephesus may have been the chief city of the Roman province of Asia, but Smyrna was more ancient and a close competitor. It was a beautiful port city that the Greek geographer Strabo dubbed "the glory of Asia". On the waterfront, at the bottom of Golden Street, the main thoroughfare, was the Temple of Cybele. If you were a tourist and made your way up the street through the city, you'd pass other grand temples dedicated to Apollo, Asklepios, and Aphrodite. And at the end of the street, where it met the foothills, was the great Temple of Zeus. The Christians of Smyrna lived surrounded by the glory of the gods of Greece.

But those weren't the only temples in Smyrna. The city fathers of Smyrna prided themselves on being forward-thinking and wisely pragmatic. Theirs had been the first of the cities of Asia Minor to align itself with Rome. In 197 B.C they appealed to the Senate for aid against Antiochus III and two years later, proving their loyalty, built the first temple in that part of the world to the goddess Roma. Through the Roman civil wars, they'd always managed to choose the side of the victor. Smyrna knew which way the wind was blowing. For their loyalty, the emperors granted Smyrna the status of "free city" and the construction of an imperial temple—and two more to follow in the years after the time period of Revelation. The citizens of Smyrna were loyal Romans. And that posed a problem for the Christians there as well.

Look now at our text, it's just a short four verses beginning a 2:8. Jesus says:

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

As I've said before, Revelation is about tribulation, kingdom, and perseverance. Jesus' people live in the midst of tribulation and it's only going to get worse for them, and so Jesus addresses them first by reminding them who he is. As he speaks to each of these seven churches, Jesus calls to mind the image that John gave of him in Chapter 1. For the Ephesians he reminded them that he is the one who holds the seven stars in his hand and who walks in the midst of the lampstands. He sustains his church. For the Smyrneans he reminds them that he is the one who is first and last, the one who died and came to life. In each case, Jesus is urging his people to persevere in the midst of tribulation and he doesn't just say, "I know it's hard, but just do it." He reminds them that he is with them. The kingdom is now. The kingdom is here. As his church, they are his kingdom and their king is with them. They're not walking through territory that is unknown to their Lord. Jesus has travelled this path before them and he stands with them now.

That's what he's getting at in reminding them that he is the first and the last. He is the Lord of history. It was by Jesus—the word—that God created all things in the beginning and it is by him that God is now making all things new. And he is the one who was crucified and rose from the grave. Not only is that how he inaugurated his kingdom, not only is it how he broke the chains of death and sin and is making all things new, it's an apt exhortation in light of what the Christians in Smyrna are facing. They are united with Jesus—yes, in his suffering, but that also means they are united with him in his resurrection and have no reason to fear death. As St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "Death is swallowed up in victory" (1 Corinthians 15:54).

Now look at Jesus' message itself, verses 9-11:

"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 first thing we should note is that Jesus has nothing bad to say about the people of this church. We can gather from the other letters that had there been a serious problem in Smyrna, Jesus would have mentioned it. These brothers and sisters were faithful. And that's just what's getting them into trouble. Jesus tells them that he's fully aware of their tribulation and their poverty—although he quickly adds that despite their poverty, they are in reality rich. This is in contrast to the Laodiceans who are materially rich, but whom Jesus condemns for being poor in faith. It's because of their faithfulness that the Smyrnan Christians are facing opposition. The immediate cause of the problem, he says, is that they've been slandered by "those who say that they are Jews and are not". He goes so far as to call them a "synagogue of satan".

What does that mean? Given what we know of the historical situation in Smyrna, it's not too hard to piece together. At this point in time, the Romans weren't really the immediate problem. Until about the time of the Emperor Nero—during whose reign John wrote to these churches—Christians enjoyed a certain amount of freedom. Everyone in the empire was required to offer at least nominal worship to the emperor, but the Jews had made such a fuss over this and caused the Romans so many problems, that they'd been granted an exemption. They agreed to pray for and to offer sacrifices for the emperor and that allowed them to live in a somewhat uneasy tension with Rome. And for some decades Christians were seen as a Jewish sect and enjoyed the same privilege. But during Nero's reign that began to change. The empire didn't approve of new religions and the Jews

about that time not only started distancing themselves from Christians, but were only too happy to insist that Christians weren't Jews and to point them out to the Roman authorities.

Why would Jews do this? Some Jews were angry that many of their brethren along with Gentile god-fearers were becoming Christians. As far as they were concerned, Jesus was most decidedly *not* the Messiah. He was a criminal who had been crucified and anyone claiming he was the Messiah was a blaspheming heretic. They were also angered at the Christian approach to the law. And the idea that unclean Gentiles could become Jews apart from total obedience to the law, well, that just had them fuming. Think of Paul telling his story to Agrippa in Acts 26:

“I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.” (Acts 26:9-11)

Jesus words to the Smyrneans about Jewish slander leading to Roman imprisonment fits with what we know from the historical record. Repeatedly in Acts we see unbelieving Jews working with the Romans and other Gentiles to persecute Christians. Paul refers to this in 1 Thessalonians and we read about it in Tertullian and in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, who was Bishop of Smyrna and martyred about ninety years later.

Remember that people like Paul, when they became Christians, wouldn't have thought of themselves as having converted to a new religion. They were Jews and they continued to be Jews. It was simply that in fulfilling God's promises, Jesus had created a new and better way of being Jewish. So the Jews would go to the Romans to report

Christians and would argue that these Christians, contrary to their claims, weren't actually Jews and their claims to be so were disturbing the status quo. Worse, they'd argue, these Christians were only use Judaism as a cover for their refusal to recognise the divinity and lordship of Caesar. And, particularly in a place like Smyrna, that sort of accusation could be disastrous, because the Smyrneans were zealous patriots of Rome and loyal worshippers of Caesar.

In Smyrna the imperial cult permeated everything. Everyone, rich and poor, was required by law to offer sacrifices to the emperor. In Smyrna, the city fathers thought this so important, that they actually provided the citizenry with money from the treasury to purchase their offerings, just so no one would have an excuse not to. And so to have any real part in public life, in government, in trade, in a guild, in various social circles you had to take part in the imperial cult and from the time that John wrote it only got worse for Christians. The empire demanded its citizens proclaim the lordship of Caesar, but for the Christians that was impossible. Jesus is Lord. They knew it and they could not betray him. And that faith was the basis for their perseverance in the truth.

This is just how it went down for Polycarp, one of the most famous martyrs of the early Church. At one particular festival, a Christian name Germanicus was thrown to wild animals in the arena and told to renounce Jesus. He refused and was killed, but seeing his faith only made the crowd angrier. They called for Polycarp, the bishop, to be brought next. He was seized and brought to the arena. He fearlessly confessed that he was a Christian and he was given the choice: Worship the divine Caesar or die. The Jews of Smyrna shouted, “This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, and the overthrower of our gods, he who had been teaching many not to sacrifice or to worship the gods.”¹

Polycarp would not renounce his Lord and was sentenced to death. The account reports that despite being the Sabbath, the Jews were foremost in gathering wood for the fire to burn the bishop. And as the fire was laid, Polycarp said, “It is well. I fear not the fire that burns for a season, and after a while is quenched. Why do you delay? Come, do your will.” And as he was consumed by the flames he prayed, “I thank thee that thou has graciously thought me worthy of this day and of this hour, that I may receive a portion in the number of the martyrs, in the cup of thy Christ.”²

The mob that martyred Polycarp echoed the Good Friday mob that shouted to Pilate, “We have no king but Caesar! Crucify him!” Is it any wonder then that Jesus would appeal to his own death and resurrection as the root of faith and source of perseverance for these Christians? They were truly to share in the same suffering that he did, and so he reminded them: I am the one who died and came to life. And in the same way that the unbelief of those Jews who cried out for Jesus' crucifixion exposed them as false Jews by their rejection of the Messiah, so these Jews in Smyrna exposed themselves as false in rejecting the Messiah's people. That's where the “synagogue of satan” part comes from. And in accusing Jesus' people falsely, these unbelieving Jews show who they really belong to. It's much like Jesus statement in John 8:

If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do 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. (John 8:42-44)

The Church is the true synagogue—the kingdom of God and the temple in which his Spirit dwells—and because of

¹ *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, Chapter 12.

² Ibid, Chapter 14

that Jesus' people need have no fear of tribulation. Jesus urges his people to persevere even as they are thrown into prison. That didn't quite mean the same thing then as it does now. Prison itself wasn't a punishment. Prison was where you were held pending trial or execution, which usually came swiftly. The devil would see them thrown in prison. For many of them, release from prison would mean execution.

"For ten days you will have tribulation," Jesus says. That's not so much a literal statement about how long this time of persecution will last. It's a reference to the first chapter of Daniel. Daniel and his three friends were tested for ten days as they went without eating the king's food. The point of the test was to see if they would come out the other side as healthy as the young men who at the king's choice food. The temptation was to compromise with pagan gods by eating from the king's table, eating meat that had been offered to idols. To eat at the king's table was also a symbolic act of loyalty—and remember that the king claimed to be divine. These young Jewish men just couldn't do that. What Jesus is saying is that this time of tribulation will test his people's loyalty to him in the same way that Daniel and his friends were tested. But it's not just a warning; it's also an exhortation. They will come out the other side of this time of testing vindicated, even though it may mean their deaths—because they have already been united with Jesus in his resurrection. "Be faithful unto death," Jesus tells them, "and I will give you a crown of life....the one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death." The "second death" is a rabbinic expression. John uses it again in Chapter 20. And if you look at the Targums, the rabbinic commentary on the Old Testament, it means exclusion from the resurrection.³ As St. Paul wrote in First Corinthians, Jesus is the firstfruits of the resurrection of the dead. Where he has gone, his people will surely follow if they are steadfast in faith. He has triumphed and holds the keys of death and hades. There will be

tribulation, but we must persevere, following where Jesus leads and knowing that we face nothing that he has not faced himself.

Now, what does this mean for us? There is a general application here for Christians everywhere. No matter how good times are for Christians, we will always face some kind of opposition. The empire and the Caesars that once persecuted and murdered the saints would, several hundred years later be conquered by the gospel and Caesar himself would bow his knee to Jesus. That part of the world over which Caesar had claimed his pagan lordship would gradually be transformed by the gospel into "Christendom". And yet even then, there were pockets and times of resistance. Jesus reminds Christians everywhere in all times of the need to stand firm in faith. We are his kingdom and we not only must persevere, but we have every reason to do so. And it is by our perseverance, even to death, that our proclamation of the kingdom is validated—that it becomes credible in the eyes of the world and spreads.

But, Brothers and Sisters, "Christendom" is no more. In our post-Christian world we face ever-increasing resistance and opposition. And whereas a few decades ago—I think of growing up during the Cold War—we tended to think of opposition in terms of Communism and an authoritarian government shutting churches and kicking in doors to search our houses for Bibles and march us off to prison, things have gone in quite a different direction—a direction I think even more troubling, in part because it's far more subtle and insidious.

The Smyrnan Christians faced ostracism, imprisonment, and sometimes martyrdom because they refused to offer that pinch of incense to Caesar. In our day the pressure comes from a post-modern culture in which objective truth has been forsaken and replaced with whatever a person *feels* to be true. We have become our own gods, creating our own realities and truths. Nevermind that those truths are, in reality, false. And along with that—in combination with

it—we've made everything about the therapeutic and about the self. The worst thing that can happen to a person is suffering. And this worldview is *everywhere* and permeates *everything*. If you struggle with same-sex attraction, you don't fight it; you embrace it. Anyone who tells you otherwise be damned, because not embracing it brings suffering, shame, and oppression. A man can claim to be a woman because who's to say he isn't—not biology, not genetics, not reality. Science is no longer the basis for truth, feelings are—and if you say otherwise, you're labelled a bigot and oppressor. In one of the latest applications of Critical Theory, a doctor who tells an overweight patient that his diabetes or heart disease is because he's overweight becomes an "oppressor". If science makes us feel bad, well it's wrong—it's labelled "oppressive". Once we allow our feelings to define our truth, there's no limit to how absurd the claims become. And we not only make our truths; we put ourselves at the centre of them. Our relationships are increasingly centre on self rather than others. Fix a relationship? Sacrifice for a relationship? No way. If someone is difficult or unpleasant—nevermind that we might be at least part of the reason for that—you cut them off and cut them out. As they say, "You don't need that kind of negativity in your life." No, you've got to take care of yourself. In fact, we've now got a term for this obsession with self, "self care," and it's fast becoming as idolatrous a cult as anything the pagan Greeks and Romans did.

But all of this isn't just "out there". The western Church has increasingly embraced what's been dubbed Moralistic Therapeutic Deism—the general belief that God wants nothing more for us than to be happy and good—however you define good. How we "do" church, how we worship, everything about the church is increasingly becoming centred on the self. Worship has been turned into an experience to be judged by how good it makes me feel. Biblical sermons have been replaced by pop-psychology and self-help. Commercialism increasingly

³ Martin McNamara, *Targum and Testament Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 190-191.

dominates how we do things. We stop asking if what we do will please God and instead ask how it will increase our marketshare. And without any deep biblical and theological anchors, Christians are increasingly compromising the good—and truth and everything else—because it’s easiest just to go with the cultural flow. The Church is leaving people utterly unprepared for the cultural tide that’s now breaking over us. Rod Dreher wrote last year, ““Relatively few contemporary Christians are prepared to suffer for the faith, because the therapeutic society that has formed them denies the purpose of suffering in the first place, and the idea of bearing pain for the sake of truth seems ridiculous.”⁴ If you have a chance, find a copy of his book, *Live Not by Lies*, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest it.

And there’s a flood of Christians now capitulating to the culture, offering their pinch of incense to the gods of post-modernism. It’s become so common we now have a term for it: Deconstruction. And it grieves me to see friends and colleagues going through this process, sliding down this slippery slope that inevitably ends in apostasy. Once orthodox Christians face the pressure and the conflict between Church and culture and they begin to “deconstruct” their faith, pulling it apart piece by piece and then rebuilding it after reconsidering the pieces. It’s so often presented as a faithful, mature, intellectual and spiritual exercise, but it’s telling that in the end the result is the same very time. You end up retaining whatever bits of Christianity you can without being in conflict with the culture, and whatever is at odds, whatever causes conflict is cast aside. It’s *always* the same bits discarded. The uniqueness of Jesus? Gone. A biblical sexual ethic? Gone. The reliability and authority of Scripture? That’s gone too. Justice? Oh, they held on to that, they say. But the version of justice they’ve got after deconstruction is no longer the biblical understanding of justice; it’s a post-modern concept of justice that has far more to do with Marxist ideology than it

does the Bible. At least as often as not, you’ll find that the person who has gone through this process has a close family member, often a child, who has “come out” as “gay” or “trans”. That’s a difficult situation to be in. If you stand firm in faith, there’s going to be conflict. But after deconstruction the conflict is gone. You can once again be at peace with yourself and with the world—and most importantly, no one out there can call you a hater or a bigot or whatever the insult of the month is.

I’ve seen it happen over and over again. I’ve watched friends slide down this slope. I’ve watched pastoral colleagues slide down this slope. I’ve watched churches that slide down this slope—listening to one acquaintance locally whose last few sermons have been full of apologies for the sexist and patriarchal language of the Bible. Brothers and Sisters, if you find yourself apologising for the Spirit-inspired words of Scripture, stop. Now. Something’s gone wrong. But this is the problem. Our culture values niceness and the therapeutic. The worst thing you could do in Smyrna was to be disloyal to Caesar. In our culture it’s to make someone feel bad—even if they should. Shame, which until now we’ve always understood to be a positive in that it discourages us from doing things we know we shouldn’t, well, now shame is a dirty word. And almost as bad as making someone else feel bad is to feel bad ourselves—to be in conflict with the mainstream, to be called out as a hater. Oddly enough, in the incoherence of post-modernism, the one time it is okay—and not just okay, but necessary—to shame someone is when they aren’t on-board with the spirit of the age.

And Brothers and Sisters, if you think it’s hard to be called a hater or a bigot or intolerant, consider how difficult it is for our children. Especially if they’ve live in the environment of government schooling, they’ve been immersed in this culture to an extent you and I may struggle to grasp. This is why we need to be diligent and faithful in teaching them the faith, in discipling them, in ensuring they know what’s true and

what’s false, and making sure they are not overcome by our therapeutic and self-centred culture. We need to recover a deep sense of the sinfulness of sin and of the holiness of God. We need to grasp the deepness of the love and grace and mercy of God and to recover a sense of the costliness of the sacrifice that Jesus made to show us that love and grace and mercy. And we need to know that if we are going to identify ourselves with Jesus, it means that we will walk with him in his suffering—in conflict with the gods and kings of this age—but that we do so in faith and in hope—even in joy—knowing that in doing so we are carrying his kingdom to the world and knowing that our kingdom hope is for life and for a world set to rights—truly set to rights by God’s standards, which are far higher than those of our culture. It’s not just about perseverance in the face of tribulation. We persevere—we will only persevere—because we know the deep truth of the kingdom: Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again.

Let’s pray: O Lord, come among us, we pray, with your power and strengthen us with your great might; that whereas, through our sins and wickedness we are grievously hindered in running the race that is set before us, your bountiful grace and mercy may speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, to whom with you and the Holy Spirit, be honour and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

⁴ *Live Not by Lies*, epub edition.