

# The Persecuted Church

Revelation 2:8–11

The book of Revelation is a message from the Spirit of God to the churches. It was addressed to the “angels” (or *messengers*) of the seven churches of Asia Minor: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.

It is thus the Holy Spirit’s message to the church. It was not written to people who have no connection to the church. A lot of people in our day seem to want Christ without the church. They do not want spiritual accountability. They want to be free agents. They want all the blessings of Christ without the messiness of being part of the covenant community, the people of God—real people at various stages of maturity: little children, young men, fathers.<sup>1</sup> Getting along with real flesh-and-blood people can sometimes be messy, and our natural human instinct might be to avoid that. But God’s word says, “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together” (Heb. 10:25). We are not to forsake the public assemblies of God’s people, meeting on the Lord’s day to worship our risen and ascended Lord Jesus Christ.

The book of Hebrews is very specific about this. We are told, “Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith. . . . Obey your leaders and submit to them—for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account” (Heb. 13:7, 17). The writer to the Hebrews was speaking of *spiritual* leaders—the elders of the assembly, in biblical parlance. This is an aspect of our fifth-commandment duty to honor our spiritual fathers in the faith. The fifth command says, “Honor thy father and thy mother.” God himself is our Father in heaven, and is to be accorded fatherly honor by his spiritual sons and daughters. In the same manner Paul says, “For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have *begotten* you through the gospel.” Paul uses the same word that is found in the biblical genealogies: ἐγέννησα, a word meaning *become the father of*: “Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac was the father of Jacob, and Jacob was the father of Judah and his brothers,” and so forth. Paul says in effect, “I begot you, I became your spiritual father through the gospel.” The minister of Christ has a solemn duty to preach the *gospel* (“Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel”). Whatever the biblical text that is to be expounded on any particular Lord’s day, the faithful minister is to preach the *gospel*: the good news of God’s salvation, to sinners lost and on their way to eternal hell. We are to preach the good news that “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” He did this by perfectly keeping God’s holy law on his people’s behalf, and by dying a substitutionary death in his people’s place. Those who

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 2:12–14

believe on the Lord Jesus Christ are saved. Faithful ministers who preach the gospel are to be honored as spiritual fathers, and we are to sit at their feet, as it were, and learn from them as they teach us the gospel. Paul calls Timothy his “son in the faith.” We who are born again by faith in Jesus Christ are spiritual sisters and brothers, part of the family of God which gathers, as it were, in a family reunion every Lord’s day, enjoying spiritual fellowship, honoring Christ as Lord of all, our spiritual Father in heaven—but in a secondary sense honoring pastors and elders as Christ’s ministers, his spiritual mouthpieces who proclaim his gospel. When we listen to the gospel being proclaimed, it is as though we are sitting at the feet of Jesus, hearing the good news of peace with God and with our fellow man through the gospel.

So the book of Revelation is a message from the Spirit of God to the churches. The section we are looking at this afternoon is addressed “to the angel [or *messenger*] of the church in Smyrna.” The title of the sermon this afternoon is “The Persecuted Church,” taken from the section head in the New King James Version. As we will see, the church at Smyrna was undergoing persecution. We should not take this as an isolated incident, for as Paul tells us, “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” (2 Tim. 3:12). So as we focus on this mini-letter to the church in Smyrna, there will be a much-needed lesson to all of us who sincerely desire to live godly lives in Christ Jesus. I have three points this afternoon: (1) Poor but rich, (2) Synagogue of Satan, and (3) Two instructions; first,

### **1. Poor but rich**

First, note the words “I know.” Who is speaking? Chapter 1 gives the answer: “The Revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:1). A little later in the first chapter he says, “I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death” (1:17–18). Clearly, the one who is speaking is the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ knows! Here is a word of comfort to the church: *Christ knows!* Whatever difficulty we are going through at any time in this vale of tears, Christ knows! The eternal Son, eternally begotten of the Father, “came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man.” “Incarnate” means *took on human flesh*. Jesus, the divine Son, is fully God and fully man, the only person in history ever to do this. The incarnate Son of God lived life with us in this vale of tears. He knows what it is like to live in a sin-cursed earth. “We do *not* have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15). *Christ knows!*

The name Smyrna (Σμύρνα) means *myrrh*. Myrrh was a fragrant gum resin used in perfume and also in embalming. The body of our Lord was embalmed with a hundred-pound mixture of myrrh and aloes.

Smyrna was an ancient city on the western coast of Asia Minor. Today, it is known as İzmir, the third most populous city in Turkey. Islam predominates today, though there is a small Christian community there. We need to pray for gospel prosperity in Turkey—for the day when Christ “shall have dominion . . . from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth” (Ps. 72:8).

Now look at verse 9: “I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich).” The Lord of glory characterizes the church of Smyrna as being at once impoverished and rich. What does this mean? Clearly, this is figurative language. A person cannot at any time be both impoverished and rich *in the same way*. It would be like saying, “I am upside down, standing tall and erect on my feet” or “I am talking and being silent.”

Think of these words. Christ is telling his church, “I know your poverty, but you are rich.” The word “but” (ἀλλά) indicates a contrast. The church of Smyrna was both impoverished and rich but *in different ways*. It was impoverished according to the riches of this world, but it was rich *spiritually*. It was not a wealthy church. Think of the Vatican by contrast. It is one of the most popular attractions in the world, drawing over five million tourists a year to its priceless works of art and opulent architecture.<sup>2</sup> There is pomp and ceremony. The Swiss guard is standing by to keep the peace.

But the gospel is not identified by earthly riches but by the truth of God’s word. Yesterday several of us attended the memorial service for the father of one of our members. It took place in a large, imposing church building on a main urban intersection. It is a beautiful red-brick facility with well-kept grounds and parking areas. God is to be thanked for his financial blessing on the congregation. But as we walked in I remarked, “The real beauty of a church is the gospel.” It is true. “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth! . . . How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!”<sup>3</sup>

The good news of Christ is preached in many places in the world with nondescript architecture, if there is any architecture at all! And without the gospel the church is nothing. When we draw our last breath on this earth and enter eternity it will not matter if the church where we heard the gospel was large or small, rich or poor. All that will be a distant memory as we enter the throne room of the King of kings! What will really count is if we are clothed in the beautiful garments of Christ’s righteousness, or whether we are wearing the filthy rags of our own imagined self-righteousness. Our focus in heaven will not be on the pearly gates and streets of gold but on our heavenly bridegroom, resplendent in all his glory.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://theincrediblylongjourney.com/2017/04/17/treasures-of-the-vatican/> accessed 4-20-24

<sup>3</sup> Isa. 52:7, Rom. 10:15

The congregation in Smyrna was impoverished according to the standards of this world but rich in grace. The exalted Christ took note of its faithfulness in good works in spite of enduring tribulation and being regarded as the filth and offscouring of this world. For Smyrna, “poor, but rich” was a badge of honor, and it is the same for every faithful church. They were rich in faith and heirs of a kingdom, though poor in this world; they were rich with the riches of Christ.<sup>4</sup> The riches of Christ are our only *true* riches; all else will crumble one day to dust. Let us put our riches into things that really matter: the lives of eternal souls that need to hear the truth of the gospel. Let us enjoy good architecture, but let us treasure the gospel even more. Second, consider the frightful phrase

## **2. Synagogue of Satan**

The judge of all the earth continues: “I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.” This is a term of infamy. Here are the enemies of the little flock in Smyrna. Chilton explains that Christ “knows all about the blasphemy of their persecutors as well—those who say they are Jews and are not. Here the Lord is explicit about the identity of the opposition faced by the early Church: Those who are otherwise known as Nicolaitans, the followers of the false apostles Balaam and Jezebel, are defined here as those who claim to be Jews, children of Abraham, but in reality are children of the devil. These are the Israelites who have rejected Christ and thus rejected the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. A popular myth holds that non-Christian Jews are true believers in the God of the Old Testament, and that they only need to ‘add’ the New Testament to their otherwise adequate religion. But the New Testament itself is adamant on this point: Non-Christian Jews are not believers in God, but are covenant-breaking apostates.”<sup>5</sup>

A lot of well-meaning Christians have a fond, sentimental but unscriptural view of Judaism: Jews are pious, well-meaning people who seek after the true God but haven’t yet seen the light of Christianity. Jesus taught “that all men should honor the Son, even as they honor the Father. He that honoreth not the Son honoreth not the Father which hath sent him” (John 5:23). I cannot emphasize this enough: Here is every man’s responsibility, the responsibility of every man, woman and child on the face of the earth: to honor the Son—Jesus the Christ—in the same manner as one honors the Father. Do not miss this: God the Father is God, the true God. True Christians honor him as God. God the Son is also God, the true God. True Christians honor him as God. Cults that deny the deity of Christ are false religions. People who do not honor the Son—that is, attend the public worship of the visible church as it worships God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit—are *not* Christians. They practice a false religion, and unless they repent and embrace the divine Christ

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<sup>4</sup> John Gill

<sup>5</sup> David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance*, 101–02

they will spend eternity in hell. This is the teaching of Christ. It is the teaching of the Bible. It is the teaching of every faithful church. Those who receive it are blessed, and those who reject it will be damned. It may not be a popular doctrine, but it is true and must be accepted. We live in a topsy-turvy world where murder is health care and evil is good and diversity and inclusiveness are prized. Let us be clear: churches that teach such abominations are synagogues of Satan, enemies of the truth. Heaven is *not* inclusive. It is for worshippers of Jesus Christ. “Neither is there salvation in any other.” Amen! All those who pose as the true religion but are enemies of Christ are synagogues of Satan. The enemy is strong, but Christ is stronger. He will be victorious! Amen!

### **3. Two instructions**

Christ speaks words of comfort and instruction to his church: “Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

Here are two instructions: “Do not fear” and “Be faithful.”

#### **a. “Do not fear”**

Why should we not fear? Because God is with us.

“Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness” (Isa. 41:10).

“Fear not: for I am with thee: I will bring thy seed from the east, and gather thee from the west” (Isa. 43:5).

“Fear thou not, O Jacob my servant, saith the LORD: for I am with thee; for I will make a full end of all the nations whither I have driven thee: but I will not make a full end of thee, but correct thee in measure” (Jer. 46:28).

The enemy is strong, but God is stronger!

#### **b. “Be faithful”**

The Christian’s duty is to be faithful. God’s job is to give the victory.

“Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.” Here are the words on my father’s tombstone. They should be written on the tombstone of every faithful Christian.

Here are our marching orders for the present time. Each of us should sit up and take notice.

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.”

Whenever Christ has instructions for his church, his people should be all ears! “Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth.” “My sheep hear my voice.”

May God grant us all listening ears! Amen.