

September 15, 2024

Revelation 2:8-11

Last week we talked about Ephesus, which at the time the book of Revelation was written, was one of the major cities of what is now western Turkey. One of the cities that rivaled Ephesus was 52 miles north: Smyrna. Unlike Ephesus, Smyrna is still a major city today, now known as “Izmir.” Smyrna was in the perfect place for a city. It was surrounded by mountains, so it would be very difficult to attack, and it sat where the Hermus River flowed out into the Aegean sea, so merchants bringing treasures from across the world would often stop at Smyrna. Smyrna was a rich, prosperous, city- a cultural hub of learning, impressive buildings and cultural monuments- Smyrna was one of the greatest cities in the region- and they knew it! This was a city filled with educated philosophers and students, wealthy merchants and business tycoons, anyone could come and make something of themselves here- *but not the Christians*. In a town filled with wealth and prosperity, the Christians were starving. They were struggling just to survive while their neighbors had more than enough. Why? Why didn’t people share with them? Because they hated the Christians. When the church in Smyrna was founded by either Paul or one of the Christians from that area, it was often the Jews in the Synagogue that were the first audience to hear about Jesus’ death and resurrection- because the Jews read and believed the Old Testament- they were supposed to expect and hope for Jesus to come and be their sacrifice. There was a large community of Jewish people in Smyrna, and they were likely wealthy like the rest of the city, and many of the Christians were a part of the Jewish community. But what likely happened, like in other cities, is that when the Jewish people saw that Gentiles, non-Jewish people could come and worship Jesus too, and that they didn’t need to abide by the Jewish food laws, and this Jesus taught that people weren’t saved by their obedience to certain rules, but by faith in him as their ultimate sacrifice for sins, they couldn’t stand it, and they shunned their own family and friends and kicked them out of their homes. And remember- there was no social security at this time. There were no food stamps. There was no safety net. You depended on your family to help you, for food, for opportunity, and we know that today- a lot of times it’s not what you know, it’s who you know. It was much more that way back then- and not only did the Jewish community shun the Christians, but they slandered them, they told lies about them, they gave them such a bad name in Smyrna that no one else would want to deal with Christians either! We aren’t sure what lies the Jews told about the Christians, but it worked. No one would do business with a Christian! No one would sell land with a Christian! No one would share bread with a Christian! And so they starved. And Jesus speaks through John to tell them this: “I know.”

Jesus says, “I know how bad it is for you. I know how painful it is to hear your children crying for food and there’s nothing you can do about it. I know the lies that your own families are telling about you so you continue to be ignored and abused by your neighbors. And it’s going to get worse.” What? Jesus says that he knows their poverty, he knows their struggle, he knows the lies, and he promises that they are truly his people and the Jews who rejected Jesus aren’t, but he never says things are going to get better. In fact, things are going to get worse. They won’t

simply be ignored or impoverished, *but hunted*. Jesus isn't the one doing it, Satan is. Satan is going to influence people to hate and actively look for opportunities to kill Christians. Why? Smyrna was very patriotic- very proud of their place in the Roman Empire, and they loved mother Rome so much that they began to worship Roman Emperors as gods, and they not only recommended that the citizens of Smyrna do the same, they commanded it. It didn't have to be much. What they would do is have someone take a pinch of incense and throw it on the altar in honor of Caesar, and that person would get a certificate showing that they did this and were a trustworthy, noble, patriotic citizen of Smyrna. And the Christians refused. And now it seems like they are going to pay for it. They are going to be in prison- and prisons in the Roman world were not for rehabilitation- they were for torture and death. Christians are going to be tortured and brutally executed while their neighbors cheer for more. Jesus says, this is coming, and you need to be ready, but only for ten days. What does that mean? When Jesus says, "ten days," he's not giving them a timeline. He's giving them perspective. The suffering they experience is controlled by Jesus- it's only going to last as long as he says it will. It's temporary, in fact, it's short, it's nothing compared to what Jesus has in store for them! A crown of life. Something to know: In Smyrna, crowns were given to athletic champions, great citizens, honored people, but not Christians- never Christians. Jesus says, a time is coming when you will have a crown on your head and you are going to live forever. How can Jesus say that? Look at what Jesus says: He's the first and the last- true God! Creator of all things! And yet- he was rejected. He was impoverished. He was tortured. He was killed- and by his own people- just like the Christians. And not even death could keep Jesus. Jesus is alive, and therefore all who believe in him, no matter what happens, are going to live forever with him in perfect glory, with a crown of life, and no one can defeat them. You see, your religion, your theology, your worldview is only as good as its answer to suffering. When you look at those suffering Christians in Smyrna, what do they need to hear? Some would say, "Well, they must deserve it- that's why the gods are being cruel to them." Some think, "better them than me, life is short." Some think, "how sad, let's feed them"- which is good, and we should, but Jesus does more than that. He promises and gives them a place where this world's suffering is nothing- ten days compared to forever with him.

1. God tests us.

Notice what Jesus says- Satan is the one responsible for the horrific things that are about to happen to the Christians, and they were horrible. But couldn't Jesus stop it? Jesus is all powerful! Jesus controls Satan! So why is he letting Satan do this to his people? It says it there- in order to test them. What does that mean? Is Jesus not convinced about the authenticity of his people's faith and they need to prove themselves? No! Jesus has already said that he knows that they are rich, and notice- he doesn't say anything negative about them. He knows that they are faithful Christians. So why does he test them? When God tests Christians, it's for their sake, not his. Look back at Job- do you notice what Satan was doing? Satan is so cynical about God's ability to work genuine faith in the hearts of his people that he assumes that if they serve God it's only because they are as self-absorbed as he is- he assumes that people only worship God for what he

gives them, not because they simply love God. Satan tries to prove that with Job, and God says, “Okay, take his wealth, his children, his wealth away, but nothing more.” And what happened? Job was faithful. Job’s faith shined through his pain and suffering- God let Satan do just enough to prove himself wrong. No, God isn’t responsible for the evil things that happen to his people- Satan is, but God does allow it- not because he doesn’t care, not because he’s punishing his people, but actually because he loves his people and is giving their faith a chance to shine. God tests his people not to see whether they really believe in him, but to prove that they do. Satan thought that by influencing Smyrna’s government to hunt down Christians, he could snuff out the church in Smyrna and make it die and the reality is this: he did the opposite. Historically, we know that the church in Smyrna didn’t die, but grew and thrived. And their people remained faithful. Years after this, members of this church were thrown to the lions and torn apart in front of roaring crowds. They were tortured. One man, Polycarp, their pastor, was arrested at 85 years old. The government officials gave him two options: be a good citizen and worship Caesar, or burn alive. His response is famous: “For 85 years I have served Christ, and he has never wronged me. How can I betray my God and King?” And he burnt, but not for long- now he shines in glory with Jesus, and so will you. Is it possible that the pain, the loneliness, the hardships you are enduring is God’s way of proving Satan wrong, and letting your faith shine? Don’t be afraid. This won’t last forever. Be faithful- why?

2. **You are rich.** I want to tell you about Kim Raddatz. She’s a member of this congregation, but she likely won’t ever be in church. This is because she had a major untimely stroke a few years ago. She lost much of her ability to speak and to walk. Shortly after, her husband died of a heart attack and her daughter, who had a severe struggle with diabetes, died of diabetic shock hours later because her father wasn’t able to regulate her blood sugar. Kim now lives in the area, and I visit her every few weeks. How do you think she feels about God? She lost her ability to walk, her ability to be understood when she talks, something we likely all take for granted, her husband, her daughter? How do you think she is? She’s *overjoyed*. I’ve gotten better at understanding her and I could make this out from the last time I saw her: “Pastor! I’m so happy to see you!” When I sit down, she exclaims, “I believe in Jesus!” “Jesus loves me!” “Jesus forgives me!” “Jesus hears me!” “Jesus never leaves me!” I have a white board with the Lord’s Prayer and another with a Psalm, and we read it together, and she grabs and squeezes my hand as we pray together. Before I left, she said, “Come back soon, I love to pray to Jesus!” I remember on my way home thinking, “How? How can this woman who has lost everything have this much joy and child-like faith in Jesus?” Because although she’s poor, she’s unthinkably rich, and she knows it. She knows that the God of Heaven and Earth became her brother in the flesh and suffered for her sins and forgives her of everything. She knows that Jesus is going to come back and she is going to walk, no, run and dance with joy in the new World. She knows that Jesus hears her prayers, even if no one else can understand her, he can, and some day, all will as she praises him with the saints in glory. She has a status as God’s child, a perfection, an identity that God has given her that no one can take away, and so do you. Jesus has suffered in your place and because of him you are more perfect, more holy, more worthy in God’s eyes and no shame, no

disappointment, no rejection, no person can take that from you. You have a world coming to you where every single one of your hardships and pains will never exist, and you are going to dwell and reign with Jesus with a crown of glory on your head. You are rich- so what if we're poor for 10 days- what's 10 days compared to forever? Therefore- be patient. Be strong. Be courageous. Be faithful- you, along with Kim, Polycarp, the Christians in Smyrna, will never die, even if you do, because Jesus is alive. Amen.