

Smyrna - Faithful Unto Death

Good morning, my name is Jared Clark, and I am the Youth Pastor here at Grace. A little bit about me: I was born and raised in Santa Barbara, and one of the things I absolutely loved to do with my dad while growing up was to go to the UCSB Gaucho basketball games. I loved time with my dad; I loved watching basketball...but know what I couldn't get enough of? UCSB's Mascot... the Phantom of the Dome! This guy would come out every night with goggles and cape and got the crowd crazy. The Phantom had a unique talent to pester the referees and opposing fans. I'll never forget him taking a "Barny the Purple Dinosaur" stuffed animal with a referee outfit on. As he came on, so did the Barny theme song came on... I love you, you love me... then it stopped and the song "Whip it" came on! The Fantom then started to beat the tar out of the Barny Stuffed animal. Crowd goes wild!

Mascots are just the best...and if you are a super fan from another team or a referee, you know the unwritten rule that you have an absolute target on your back. Mascots are known for dancing around opposing fans, dumping popcorn on them, shooting them with silly string, or a good old whip cream pie to the face. My favorite was watching a mascot take a fake spider on a fishing pole with string and hover it over an opposing fan. Guy jumped a mile high! It's all in good fun!

However, in sports there are also times where you can see fans from one team treat fans from an opposing team in a manner that pushes the limits. Imagine if the Cooper's, a faithful Dodger family, moved to San Francisco, and wore their LA hats around town... imagine shop owners started to charge them double, restaurant owners wouldn't serve them meals, or locals would threaten to hurt them if they walked in certain neighborhoods with their LA gear. At this point, one could argue that they were being persecuted for their identity as LA Sports fans.

This morning we will be studying Jesus' Words to the church of Smyrna from Revelation 2. We will be looking at a church that had experienced persecution and would continue to be persecuted for the sake of the gospel.

Questions...What is persecution? Have you been persecuted before? Will you be persecuted as a Christian? If you've never been persecuted for your faith in Jesus Christ before... why not? I would say that you have a serious dilemma. Because it begs the question... why? In short, persecution is when one is wronged or mistreated for their faith, beliefs, or identity.¹ Is persecution something we read about in the Bible? Are we given examples of it? Are we prepared for it? Will you face it? And are we are called to persevere through it? ... Yes.

¹ The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia gives a very helpful definition of persecution: Persecution is the suffering or pressure, mental, moral, or physical, which authorities, individuals, or crowds inflict on others, especially for opinions or beliefs, with a view to their subjection by recantation, silencing, or, as a last resort, execution. (Bromiley, G. W. (1979–1988). [Persecute; Persecution](#). In G. W. Bromiley (Ed.), *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised* (Vol. 3, p. 771). Wm. B. Eerdmans.)

5 truths we must remember when facing persecution: You must remember... 1. Jesus rewards you. 2. Jesus is with you. 3. Jesus may be testing you. 4. Jesus calls you to remain faithful even unto death. 5. Jesus has made you an overcomer.

We know that John the author of Revelation had been condemned to labor in mines on the island of Patmos by the emperor Domitian in around 95/96 AD.² It was in this setting that John was called by the resurrected Jesus to write to these seven churches.³

Revelation 1:9 states, “I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.”

John has identified with his brothers and sisters in Christ. Jesus is having one who has suffered for the sake of Christ be the instrument to write to this church in Smyrna. That is encouraging! John’s not writing from some high castle eating grapes and sipping iced lattes from Makenna Coffee. He’s writing from the mines of a forsaken volcanic island reserved for the scum of the Mediterranean world.

About Smyrna.⁴ Smyrna was beautiful both in nature and in architecture. The church was started in a city that was absolutely immersed in the cultic worship of the emperor and the pantheon of Rome. Smyrna was permitted the high privilege to host a provincial cult to the emperor.⁵ Smyrna had a massive temple for the emperor Domitian that was built only six years before the church received this letter. The statue of Domitian has been estimated by archaeologist to stand more than 20 feet high! It was mandatory for Smyrna’s citizens to worship the image of the emperor.⁶ Failure would result in death.⁷

² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.30.3; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.20.7-8; 3.32.1; 5.8.5-7; Jerome, *Against Jovinianus* 1.26; Victorinus *Apocalypse* 10:11.

³ As we’ve already heard in previous sermons, these letters were written by John, the last of the Apostles, on behalf of Jesus to seven distinct first century churches in Asia Minor. These are real churches, but their message is also for all churches including our church today.

⁴ Smyrna, possibly from the word “myrrh,” a precious spice and sweet perfume, a resinous gum that was used on dead bodies and for embalming (e.g., Ex. 30:23; Song of Solomon 3:6; Ps. 45:8 Song. 5:5, 13). It was a gift given in new life, the gift the Magi gave to the newborn King, and a gift given in death, as Nicodemus brought myrrh to anoint and prepare Jesus’s body (John 19:39). One could note that Myrrh was certainly a fitting name symbolically for the city and the church. Smyrna is near the eastern shore of the Aegean Sea. It is 35 miles away from Ephesus. It had a significant harbor and a prominent road that led to the city. This made it an important city for trade and commerce. The city itself is estimated to have been the home to over 100,000 people. This is a little smaller than our city of Simi Valley (125,000). It was no small city in the Roman Empire. It competed with Pergamum and Ephesus as the chief city of Asia Minor. It was renowned as “The Jewel of Ionia” (*JGRom* IV.1424), “The ornament of Asia”, or even noted on its coins as the “Fist City of Asia” (Witnessed on the coins of Caracalla).” It is not certain when this church began. The church in Smyrna likely began after Paul had died in Rome. (Polycarp, *Letter to the Philippians* 11.3). However, it could have begun during Paul’s three year stay in Ephesus. Or from faithful Christians who had returned to their hometown after they had heard the gospel at Pentecost (Acts 2:9).

⁵ Including Augustus, Tiberius, Nero, and Domitian. This granted the city a significant honor amongst its neighbors. Hosting the provincial cult brought them in high favor with the imperial families at Rome.

⁶ One was required to burn incense on Caesar’s altar. See the coins in the front lobby that has an image of an altar of Tiberius.

⁷ The city also had a curved street around a sloping hill that some would compare to a necklace of Jewels. The jewels of this street included temples to Zeus, Cybele, Apollo, Askeplios, and Aphrodite. One of the principal deities was Cybele – a mother goddess of nature and fertility. This city was renowned for its beauty by writers in antiquity.

With this in mind, please turn to Revelation 2:8-11,

⁸“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. ⁹I 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. ¹⁰Do 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. ¹¹He 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.’”

John first reminded his readers that Jesus is the first and the last, the one who died and came to life. These truths bring encouragement to those who will suffer and about to die for Christ!⁸

Jesus has always existed in the past and He will always exist in the future. He is reminding the church of Smyrna and us that those Roman gods are nothing. Jesus is the true and only God, and He has conquered death! So, what is the worst thing that could happen to you if you were to die?⁹ You go to heaven! Ultimate triumph lies ahead. Your pain will be temporary compared to the eternal joy set before you by the Savior.¹⁰

Looking back at verse 9 of our text Jesus says, 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. The Church of Smyrna has been hammered with affliction. Emperor worship has been in their face since their inception as a church. Yet it is encouraging knowing that our Great High Priest completely knows our affliction.

Jesus is omniscient and omnipresent. He knows all and is everywhere. Revelation 2:23 states, “I am he who searches mind and heart.”¹¹ In the following part of Revelation 2:9 Jesus says to His hearers... you are poor and yet rich? How are they poor? Likely from being robbed and having their money seized under persecution.¹² Or perhaps from faithfully spending and giving their money to honor Christ. How are they rich? Rich in gold and silver? They are experiencing

But these beautiful architectures were havens of debauchery, idolatry, and vile cultic practices. Can you imagine our 118-freeway adorned with massive temples on both sides to these pagan gods? Instead of seeing the mall on one side you saw prominent buildings to all kinds Mosqs, Eastern temples, and pagan churches. These may have been architecturally beautiful, yet they were satanic to their core. Imagine being surrounded everywhere you go in Simi. On their coins they handled every day, the Christians at Smyrna would see images of the emperors in temples, as well as the same deities who had temples that enveloped their city. Their world, everywhere they looked, was plagued with idolatry and the pressure to bow the knee to Satan’s marionettes.

⁸ This is the same title for the God of Israel in Isaiah 44:6; 41:4; 48:12). This is exactly what Jesus wanted resonating in the hearts of his hearers at the beginning and end of the book of Revelation. Revelation 1:8 and 22:13. “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” See also Psalm 90:2 – “From everlasting to everlasting you are God”. 1 Timothy 1:17 – “To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.” Hebrews 13:8 Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever!

⁹ Cf. Romans 1:4; Revelation 1:5. We can be reminded that Jesus Himself was rejected and persecuted to death!

¹⁰ See 1 Corinthians 15:20, 54-58.

¹¹ See Psalm 139.

¹² cf. Hebrews 10:34.

suffering for Christ, yet they will experience eternal reward for their suffering unto Christ. James 2:5 reminds us they are rich in faith.¹³ We know their reward and our reward in Heaven.¹⁴

Matthew 5:10-12 states, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”¹⁵

This passage is from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. The context: Jesus is teaching about true righteousness that qualifies a man or woman for the Kingdom of Heaven. These are identifying marks of a Christian. In other words, if you follow Christ then this will be true of your life. You will be persecuted. When Jesus says, “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Matt. 5:9) this is not talking about calling everyone get along.

Matthew 10:34-39 states, ³⁴“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. ³⁶And a person’s enemies will be those of his own household. ³⁷Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. ³⁸And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

The gospel message is offensive and will divide because people love their sin (John 3:19-21). As a Christian, you will be a peacemaker. You will help others have peace between God and men by giving them the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Verse 9 of Revelation 2 continues, “I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.” The word *blasphemy* or *slander* refers to enemies of the church who were slandering Christians with false charges. They were likely making claims that Christians were disloyal to Rome and the Emperor.¹⁶ These hostile enemies are noted as ethnic Jews.¹⁷ Fifty years later, we know that certain physical Jews gathered fuel on the Sabbath for the burning of Polycarp the Bishop of Smyrna for His martyrdom.¹⁸

Following in the text of Revelation 2, it states that these Jews were from the “Synagogue of Satan.”¹⁹ Jesus calls this synagogue in Smyrna the synagogue of Satan because Satan was

¹³ cf. 2 Corinthians 6:4-10; 8:9.

¹⁴ cf. Matt. 19:29.

¹⁵ cf. Luke 6:22-23.

¹⁶ This could lead them to imprisonment and death. cf. Acts 12 (James’ martyrdom).

¹⁷ Similarly, as witnessed in Acts 13:45, 50; 14:2, 5, 19; 17:5; 1 Thess. 2:15, 16. They are not Jews in the truest spiritual sense as we see in Romans 2:28-29 where inwardly their hearts have been circumcised by God’s transforming work (cf. Matt 3:9; Rom. 9:6; Phil. 3:3).

¹⁸ Mart. Polyc. 13, 21; Also, similarly *Mart. Pion.* 4

¹⁹ Jewish synagogues were made up of at least 10 men. Synagogues came about after the first temple was destroyed in 586 BC. Israelites could no longer worship at the temple. Consequently, they started up new places of worship.

involved with ethnic Jews in this persecution. John 8:44 describes how Jesus told certain Jewish teachers that their real father was Satan and not Abraham.²⁰

Revelation 2:10 - “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.

This is an imperative command! You must not fear! Stop being afraid! Why? Jesus is with you and your reward is in heaven with Christ. It’s like having Steph Curry or Michael Jordan on your team in a 2x2 basketball game, just give them the ball and rest in their care. Jesus knows what is best for you! Have you ever seen a student break down in tears with joy upon graduation or finally riding their bike for the first time, and they just look at their mom and dad with the smile of joy and realization it was so worth it? That delight, pure joy, and relief I’ve seen from my girls in situations like these is amazing! Its times like these where it clicks that the parent did understand the situation perfectly, and they were right that the end is worth it! We must remember, Jesus is our pearl of great price. He is our great high priest who knows what’s best for us and is with us. Knowing that Christ is with you, He’s gone before you, changes everything. He can relate with everything. There is never going to be a situation where Jesus doesn’t get it!

The verse in Revelation continues, “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.”

The situation here is that Satan himself will be involved in casting these Smyrnian believers in prison for 10 literal days.²¹ And what is happening amidst this time? They are being tested. Are we being tested amidst persecution? Absolutely! Look at the life of Joseph in Genesis. He was sold out by his own brothers into slavery as a teenager, hung out to dry by Potiphar and his wife, left in an ancient prison,²² and yet God was with Joseph amidst his trials (Gen 39:2, 5, 21-23). In Psalm 105:17-19 we see God was testing Joseph!

1 Peter 1:6-7 states, “In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”²³

Continuing in Revelation 2:10-11 we see our fourth calling. Another Imperative command, “You must be faithful unto death.” This can be translated grammatically as well “keep on being faithful even unto death.” You must continue to show yourself faithful at all cost. Jesus was aware that some hearing these very words for the first time would face physical death for their faith. Yet we

²⁰ cf. John 8:48, 52.

²¹ Ten days are to be taken literally; this is the most natural reading of the text. We see literal numbers used throughout Revelation. We know that seven literal Churches are being written (Rev. 1:11, also 20). Ten horns represent literal leaders in Revelation 13 and 17. Four angels in 7:1. 1260 days and 42 months in Revelation 11:2-3 is extremely specific!

It is likely that their time in prison would be their interim period of torment before anticipating martyrdom

²² While making godly decisions for the Lord (Gen. 39:9; 41:16; 42:18; 45:7-9; 50:19-20, 24)

²³ See also James 1:2-4.

have the promise of, "and I will give you the crown of life" The crown of life – can be translated "the crown which consists of life" = "eternal life". Their crown is eternal life.²⁴

Women can face pain in childbirth knowing their precious child will soon be in their arms. We can suffer for our faith knowing our reward is sure. Our eyes are ahead. Suffering and death are temporary while eternal glory with Christ is forever.²⁵ We must be willing to make such a sacrifice because our life was purchased at a cost of the blood of Christ.²⁶

Our last truth we are commanded to remember is that overcomers won't face the second death = the final death for those who reject Christ.²⁷ Who is an overcomer? John tells us in first epistle. 1 John 5:4-5 states, "For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. ⁵ Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?"

You and I will overcome the world if we have true authentic faith in Jesus. So let me now ask you? Will you face persecution as a Christian? We've already shown this is true with the context of the Sermon on the Mount. But look also to 2 Timothy 3:12, "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." Will everyone give you a high-five every time you share the gospel? No. Are you called to share the gospel? Yes! The great commission is for all believers (Matt. 28:18-20)!

1 Peter 2:9-10 makes this so clear. "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

Why must you proclaim? Because you know the gospel! You know John 3:16! You know Ephesians 2:8-10! You know Romans 10:9! This is your most precious gift you have.

²⁴ The genitive ("of life") is the genitive of apposition, meaning description or definition. The word "life" defines what the crown is just like in Ephesians 6 with the helmet of salvation. Just like those crowned at athletic games, or those who receive a royal crown to rule, this crown which is eternal life is a crown of victory. Smyrna was known for its athletic games... this is the type of crown they would have likely had in mind (cf. 1 Cor. 9:24, 25; Gal. 2:2; Phil. 3:14; 2 Tim. 2:5; 1 Pet. 5:4). These words also echo what James wrote to persecuted Christians in James 1:12, "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him."

²⁵ 2 Corinthians 4:17-18 states, "For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, ¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal."

²⁶ 1 Corinthians 6:20.

²⁷ Look at what wonderful examples we have in Scripture. Look at Daniel, Shadrach Meshach and Abendigo, Steven, James. Church history records that every apostle besides John was brutally martyred for their faith. They did this because their life is not as important as their cause. These guys walked with Jesus and knew everything about Him. Would they die for a lie? No, just as we read at the end of our text, they knew they would receive the crown of life which means they will inherit eternal life. These apostles also took heed to the imperative command to hear, they knew the truth and they knew that they are overcomers and will not be hurt by the second death, eternal death, the final death for those who reject Christ (Rev. 20:11-15).

I asked Danny Lee a couple weeks ago if I could borrow his copies of Lord of the Rings the extended editions. When I watched I was reminded of Gollum and his precious ring. Gollum does nothing but think about the ring, he studies the ring, he loves the ring more than anything, the ring is his precious that has changed his life forever. But do you know what Gollum would never do with the ring? Share it. We must not be a Gollum with the gospel. If you had the cure to cancer, would you put it in your pocket? You have the cure for sin and death, and you must share it so that others might delight in your precious Savior.

Church, it's not easy. You will be hated because they hated Jesus first and when you share, they may choose to reject Christ (John 15:18; Luke 10:16; 2 Cor 12:9-10). For me it's all I've ever known. I share because you are not alone. It cost me everything to follow Christ... best friends, family, and relationships. I have been ostracized, rejected, abandoned, belittled, and made fun of. I was kicked out of my house by the ones I loved because I would not stop sharing the gospel in their town.

Being rejected for Christ became a regular reality for me when I came to faith in Christ going into my freshmen year in High School. I share because you are not alone. It cost me everything to follow Christ... friends, family, and relationships. I have been ostracized, abandoned, belittled, made fun of, and rejected more times than I can remember. In college, I was even kicked out of my house by the ones I loved because I would not stop sharing the gospel in their town. But whatever setting I was put in became the mission field. We all have unique mission fields. I'll end by sharing about my mission field in college... water polo and my classmates.

You will be persecuted for your works for Christ and proclamation of the gospel. But, you can remember, Jesus rewards you, Jesus is with you, Jesus may be testing you. You must remain faithful even unto death, and lastly you are an overcomer in Christ. For the sake of souls and the glory of Christ...let's go turn the world upside down for Jesus!²⁸

²⁸ John Chrysostom (349-407 AD) says: "There is nothing colder than a Christian who does not work for the salvation of others ... How can such a person be a Christian? I ask you, if you mixed leaven with flour but it did not make it rise, would it still be leaven? If a perfume did not fill a room with fragrance, would we still call it perfume? Don't tell me, 'It is impossible for me to influence others.' If you are a Christian, it is impossible for you not to influence others! So do not offend God. If you say, 'the sun cannot shine,' you offend Him. If you say, 'I, a Christian, cannot be of service to others,' you have offended Him and called Him a liar. It is easier for the sun not to shine than for a Christian not to do so ... It is not possible for a Christian's light to lie concealed. So brilliant a lamp cannot be hidden!"