

KING OF THE JUNGLE

SERMON TITLE: SUFFERING IN SMYRNA

REVELATION 2:8-11

What do the names [San Sebastian](#), [San Valentino](#), [San Lorenzo](#), and [San Callisto](#) have in common? They are the names of four of Rome's famous catacombs. On our recent trip to Italy, Kathy and I visited the catacombs of San Sebastian - one of forty different subterranean burial grounds outside the city of Rome. The catacombs were carved from the soft volcanic rock of southern Italy. They're an underground maze of tunnels and chambers lined with burial cubicles. Like ant colonies, catacomb layers burrow into the ground.

Among the pagans of early Rome cremation was the popular means of disposing of their dead, *but with the Christians came the belief in a bodily resurrection*. As the body of Jesus was made incorruptible, so will the bodies of His followers. We'll also be resurrected. Thus, out of respect for the body's future restoration the Christians wrapped and buried their loved ones.

Of course, this isn't to say that in modern times cremation isn't a suitable alternative for a Christian... In ancient Rome cremation was tied to the Greek view of the physical world and human flesh. They believed the tangible world was sinful. The body was a cage for the soul. *Salvation for the soul was freedom from its flesh*. The

Greco-Roman disdain for all things physical was epitomized by the cremation of the body. In reality, cremation doesn't harm the body any more than natural decay. Either way it's dust to dust, ashes to ashes, whether the deterioration happens in 20 minutes or over 20 years. But in the ancient world, [Christian burial showed respect for the human body as God's creation, and hope for its future resurrection.](#)

This is why the Christians of Rome wanted to bury their loved ones... *But the cost of land was steep... And many of the Christians were poor.* Those who started out rich often became poor in the wake of persecution. So Christians carved out underground graveyards. During the days of pagan Rome, Christians were often martyred by paranoid emperors - and many of these faithful believers were buried in the catacombs. It's a sobering experience to visit Rome today and walk the tunnels. You're humbled by the valiant sacrifice, and courageous faith of so many Christians.

Another of the catacomb's treasures is the window it provides us into early Christian belief. The caverns are decorated with engravings, frescos, and symbols. Two images of Jesus are popular in the catacombs...

First, is [Jesus the Healer](#). He's depicted over and over with His hands on people - mostly poor people. *The Roman god of healing never touched a commoner.* The other familiar image is that of [Jesus the Good Shepherd](#) - usually with a lamb over His shoulders.

It's interesting that in the Christian graveyard Jesus was most identified as a caring **Healer** and **Shepherd**. You'd think the ancient martyrs would've doubted Jesus' love for them... *Where was He when they were thrown to the lions or burned at the stake? Why didn't He heal their tortured body before it died? Where was the Shepherd when His lambs were slaughtered?* Apparently, Jesus does heal and rescue, but not in the way we always like. Christians in the catacombs believed Jesus is *the eternal healer*. He's *the shepherd that escorts His sheep from this life into the next*. I bring this up, because of the seven churches in Revelation 2-3, Smyrna is called "**The Church of the Catacombs**." It's the persecuted church. In fact, I've entitled this morning's lesson, "**Suffering in Smyrna**."

It's interesting that in each of His seven letters to the churches, the Lord Jesus follows a similar template... First, you have a **revelation** of the glorified Christ. Each time Jesus recalls a feature of the vision John received in Chapter 1! To Ephesus, Jesus comes as *"He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands."*

Second, there's a **commendation** of the church. Jesus offers encouragement. Here's what you're doing right! To the Ephesians, *"I know your works, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil."*

Third, there's a **correction**. Most of the churches had gotten off course, and here the Captain attempts to right the ship. Who can forget His words to the mother-ship at

Ephesus, *“You have left your first love.”* But let me point out, Smyrna is one of only two churches that Jesus doesn't correct. There's nothing negative said of Smyrna. This is an exemplary church. The Church at Smyrna handled her hardships in a noble manner. Persecution purified this Church.

Verse 8 begins Jesus' letter, *“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write...”* *“Smyrna”* is the only one of the seven cities in chapters 2-3 that's still an active, modern city. Today, *Smyrna* is known as *Izmir, Turkey*. The coastal city is 35 miles north of Ephesus and was called *“The crown of Asia”* for its scenic beauty. In the first century *Smyrna* competed with *Ephesus* as the Province's most handsome and prosperous city. Today, tourists flock to visit the ruins of Ephesus - all that's left is stone and rubble - but to do so, they catch a flight, then stay and eat, and spend their money at a hotel in Izmir. *Ultimately, Smyrna won the competition.*

One thing is certain about ancient *Smyrna* - the city gave off a pleasant aroma. The word *“Smyrna”* is an old Greek word for *“myrrh”* - which is an aromatic resin. Myrrh gum comes from trees that are slit open, then twisted. The harvesters wrench the limb over and over to bleed out the gum. This is what becomes the spice. How ironic, this is also how the believers in Smyrna became so pleasing to God. They were wounded and wrenched by the hands of persecution, until they bled sweetness. Rather than grow resentful or bitter toward God the twisting of opposition caused a tighter and purer allegiance. It yielded a more pungent testimony. This church was a sweet fragrance to God.

And not only was myrrh a sweet-smelling resin, the aroma was so strong it could mask the odor of death. It was applied whenever a corpse was wrapped for entombment. To the ancients, myrrh was a burial spice. Thus, the Greek name “*Smyrna*,” or *myrrh*, was synonymous with death and mourning. Which further identifies this City’s Church with persecuted believers.

Last week we mentioned that the seven churches of Revelation are a representative sample of ALL churches - *at that time, through the ages, even today*. There were dozens of churches in Asia in the first century. It wasn’t just their location on the mail route, or coincidence, that caused Jesus to choose these seven, and put them in this order. He had bigger reasons. Could it be Jesus sees in these churches a prophetic glimpse of all Church History? Not only is each church an actual church, but the seven together paint a picture of the Christian era - from the first century until now.

Ephesus was the first century Church of the Apostles. Many of its members were eye-witnesses of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Yet what a testimony to the wandering, fickle heart of man that already the early church had begun to leave behind its first love. Jesus rebuked the church, and tells them how to refuel their passion and zeal. **Remember** from where you’ve fallen. **Repent** or turn around you affections. Then **repeat** the first steps that caused your faith to grow. Jesus knew it’s

easier to act your way into a feeling, than it is to feel your way into an action. Thus, He tells them repeat the first impulses of a fresh faith.

But here's why it was so necessary for the early church to be *on fire for Jesus* - because just down the road of history in Smyrna there were *hot fires raging*. The Church of the second and third centuries - the Smyrna era - will experience horrible persecution. The Church will need to draw on its passion and zeal.

In fact, between the years 65 and 312 AD, over five million Christians were martyred by Roman emperors. *Believers in Jesus - just like you and me - fellow members* of the universal Church, were crucified and left on the cross until the vultures pecked the flesh off their bones... *Fellow believers* were fed to lions... The blood of *our brothers* still stains the Colosseum floor... *We* were dressed in lamb's skin, and thrown into the arena with wild dogs... *We* were dipped in wax, impaled on a pole, and used as candles to light the Emperor's parties... *We - members of our church* - were abused and mistreated for the cause of Christ.

Yet some of us today gripe and complain and get mad at God when we don't get the parking spot we wanted... If the details of life don't go our way we wonder, "*Where was God? Why did He let me down?*" When it's cool to be a Christian we're *all in...* But if we can't get a date because of our Christian standards... or we're laughed at... or we're pressured by a boss... or rejected for Jesus' sake... we're ready

to pack it in. Christianity is no fun anymore. *What's in it for me? What about the abundant life Jesus promised?*

If you're a selfish, spineless Christian, and you make it to heaven, don't hang out with anybody from the Church in Smyrna. When it's time to show your scars you might be a little embarrassed. Don't expect the guys from Smyrna to empathize with your shallowness. Where did you get the idea that God promised us a trouble-free life? He promised us just the opposite... Jesus said, **"In this world you will have tribulation..."**

GK Chesterton once said, **"Jesus promised His disciples three things – that they would be completely fearless, and absurdly happy, and in constant trouble."** Don't be surprised when you hear that a Christian has been persecuted. Be surprised when you hear of a Christian who hasn't been. In a world that hated Jesus how can we expect not to be hated some ourselves? If there's not a rub - a clash - a push back from the world - there might be something wrong with our faith.

According to historians the Apostle John had a disciple who pastored in Smyrna. Polycarp lived from 69 to 155 AD - and he left his church quite a legacy. When the Roman proconsul threatened to burn him at the stake, Polycarp replied, **"Eighty and six years I have served Him, and He never once wronged me, how shall I blaspheme my King Who has saved me?"**

Rather than nail him to the wood, his executioner tied him with ropes... Polycarp promised not to flinch. From the stake he shouted, “You threaten fire which burns for an hour and is soon quenched; for you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment...” Witnesses say the flames that were suppose to burn Polycarp refused to touch him. They encircled him like an arch. Someone wrote, “we perceived a fragrant odor like the scent of incense...” What would you expect from the pastor at Myrrh-na!

In the end, since Polycarp’s body wouldn’t burn, the executioner was ordered to plunge a dagger into his side. Even then, legend has it, a dove exited his body, and enough blood flowed out to extinguish the fire. This was the Christian faith lived out by the Church at Smyrna... Imagine, trying to comfort this church!

Last week I viewed a couple of episodes of “NY Med.” I was walking through the living room, and asked Kathy what she was watching. It took 5 minutes, and I was riveted to the TV. The show takes you into the emergency room at Presbyterian Hospital in NYC. It documents real-life dramas. Sick people fighting the odds. Battling death - some winning, some losing. As I watched the show, my problems didn’t seem as large. I thought, *how do you help people who’s very life is hanging in the balance?* This was also the church at Smyrna. They too, were facing the possibility of death.

Remember the book of Revelation was written to believers who remembered Jesus while on earth, had seen Him ascend to heaven, knew He was coming back, but in

the meantime were suffering some severe persecution. They're wondering, "What's next for us?" What hope would you give this suffering church? If you could direct their eyes, where would you fix them?

Revelation reveals heaven's answer to that question. *It's Jesus!* Jesus is Lord! Jesus reigns! His will is best! Jesus is the answer for the sufferers at Presbyterian Hospital and in the Church at Smyrna. Whether you live or die the point of the struggle is to know, and walk with Jesus... He's the first and last, the beginning and end. He holds "*the keys of Hades and Death.*" Jesus is what's next in God's plan for you! Revelation *unveils Jesus* so you can find hope in Him!

Here's how Jesus comforts the suffering church at Smyrna. Verse 8, "*These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life...*" He gives them a vision of Who He is - but at the point of their need. If I were facing death, this is the Doctor with whom I'd schedule an appointment! He "*was dead and came to life.*" These are credentials that impress me! Jesus has firsthand experience with life and death situations. The doctors on NY Med admit their guessing most of the time. But *Jesus has been wherever you're going.*

This is why throughout the ages whenever the Church is persecuted it overcomes by looking to Jesus. The church of the catacombs endured by recognizing Jesus as their Ultimate Healer and Good Shepherd. Remember this book is titled the "*Revelation,*" or "*unveiling.*" Today, Jesus sits on the throne in heaven, not just a

model Servant or a sacrificial Savior, but as a Conquering King. In Chapter 1 John saw the exalted Christ. And now to each of the seven churches He reveals a different feature of His glory and authority. G. Campbell Morgan once said, “The supreme need in every hour of difficulty and depression is a vision of Jesus.” To follow Him - especially through difficulties - I need to see Him as One Who is worthy to be followed.

I hope you realize Jesus is the ultimate answer to whatever question you're asking! He's multi-faceted. Jesus is like a Swiss Army Knife - *all purpose*. He has overcome, and now speaks to every human need. Wherever you're at - Jesus is the next step! Whether my hardship is persecution - or illness - or work - or school - I need to get my eyes on Jesus!

He goes on to comfort the sufferers at Smyrna in verse 9, “I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich)...” This word “*poverty*” speaks of “*abject poverty*.” It's the idea of no food, no shelter. It was costly to be a Christian in Smyrna.

To understand the pressure this Church was under you need to realize the make-up of Roman society. Rome had all kinds of factions and loyalties. It was divided among trade guilds, and labor unions, and social rank, and ethnic origin - there were slaves and free - citizens and non-citizens - civilians and soldiers. And each splinter group had a fraternal component. They acted like a sorority or club. They worked side-by

side, and lived close-by, and hosted celebrations, and worshipped their own peculiar god or goddess.

This was problem number one for the Christians. To get a job you had to join the union - and to join the trade guild you had to pay homage to its patron deity. The Christians refused. They served one God and His name was Jesus. This often meant to become a Christian was to join the ranks of the unemployed.

But there was another problem for the Christians. Despite all its factions, what brought all of Rome together was the worship of the Emperor. There were Temples all over the empire dedicated to Caesar. *Citizens would approach the altar, take a pinch of incense, cast it on the fire, and invoke their pledge of allegiance, “Caesar is Lord.”* The Romans were somewhat tolerant. It didn't matter who else you worshipped as long as you bowed to the Caesar.

Famed archeologist William Ramsey writes, *“In no part of the world was there such fervent and sincere loyalty to the emperors as in Asia... they deified him as the Savior of mankind, and worshipped him with whole-hearted devotion as the ‘present deity.’”* Rome had brought peace to the previously war-torn region of Asia. The people viewed the Emperor as their Savior. In fact, in 26 AD the city of Smyrna was rewarded with the privilege of building a Temple dedicated to the Emperor Tiberius. There was no way the Christians in Smyrna, and across Asia, could avoid a confrontation. When they refused to bow to Caesar they became an enemy of the

state. Now finding a job was the least of their worries. They were hunted down like criminals.

If the Christians had *bent* just a little. If they'd agreed to tip their hat to this god or that goddess, they could've joined a trade union and gotten a decent job. Just three little words "*Caesar is Lord*" would've bought them peace and safety - a hassle-free life. And they could've downplayed their compromise as a notch above paying taxes. Rationalized it as no big deal. But their conscience and convictions wouldn't let them. They had seen the exalted Christ. They knew Jesus was Lord of all lords and King of all kings. He had no rivals. And they refused to diminish Jesus by sharing their allegiance with anyone else - especially a silly, mythological deity - or a Caesar with clay-feet. Thus, they put a target on their back.

And I love how Jesus comforts the loyal believers in Smyrna. He lets them know that He knows... He sees what they're enduring for His name sake... Their sacrifices have not gone unnoticed... He tells them in verse 9, "*I know your works, tribulation, and poverty...*" Sometimes the greatest comfort you can bring to a sufferer is the simple acknowledgement of their pain. When wounds are open, and emotions are raw - the person might not be ready or even looking for answers. In the midst of their grief, rational thought isn't always what's needed. A shoulder to cry on - someone who says "*I've been there*" - provides the best comfort.

Jesus assures them, *“I know your poverty...”* Then He adds a quick truth that strikes sharply and gets right to the point... He adds, *“(but you are rich)...”* Then He goes right back to commiserating with them... Yes, they need a shoulder to cry on, but they also need to know the truth. Their poverty is temporary. Jesus sees them from His eternal perch, and right around the corner untold treasures await this Church!

The comfort Jesus promises the Church at Smyrna, and every church, is not the absence of conflict, but peace in the midst of conflict. It's not money, but spiritual riches. It's not *happiness now*, but *joy forever*. My friend Gayle Erwin sent me a fax not long ago. It read, *“Your stock in heaven is rising. Invest everything!”* This is the realization Smyrna needs.

The Christians in Smyrna couldn't get a job - were enemies of the State - and they had a third problem... They'd been kicked out of the local synagogue. The only group exempt from Emperor worship were Jews. Which meant as long as Christianity was seen as a sect of Judaism, believers were safe from Roman hostilities. But once the Jews rejected the Gospel, and kicked the Christians out of the synagogue, they had no other refuge. This was three strikes and you're out!

And this is the dilemma Jesus discusses next, verse 9, *“And I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.”* Most of the early Christians were Jews. It was one thing to be outcast from Roman society, and be declared an enemy of the state - but to be divorced from your own heritage -

this was a tough pill to swallow. If the Governor calls you a heretic that's one thing, but if it comes from your Grandma that stings!

This was going on in Smyrna. Believers were being excommunicated from their families... **Burn me at the stake, but please let me eat dinner at Mama's table!** I'm not being flippant - the rejection of a spouse or parent is often the most painful form of persecution. *Jesus knows...* John 1:11 says of Jesus, **"He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him."** You can feel the pain in this verse. Pain oozes from this verse.

But it's interesting, Jesus endured such rejection by finding new family. Later in Luke 8:21, Jesus pointed to His disciples and said, **"My mother and My brothers are these who hear the Word of God and do it..."**

This is what Jesus is suggesting to the Church at Smyrna. The occupants of the town's synagogue claim to be God's people, but they're not. They might be Jewish in name and bloodline, but they have no spiritual relationship - no faith-connection - to God. Paul wrote the same in Romans 2:28, **"For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly... but he is a Jew who is one inwardly..."** True children of God aren't just born into Abraham's family, you and I must be born again. The Jewish synagogue in Smyrna - the religious community that rejected their Messiah - had become **"a synagogue of Satan."** They were the ones whom God had rejected - not the believers in His Son Jesus.

Jesus continues addressing the church in verse 10, “Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer.” This is more tough meat to chew on. It’s great to hear, “No fear!” But He warns, there’s more rough stuff on the horizon - “which you are about to suffer.” Again, this is not the kind of message from Jesus we like to hear. We want the suffering to end. We don’t like to prepare for more difficulty ahead. Yet this may well be the message Jesus is wanting to deliver to us...

In the days ahead... If you stand up for the biblical definition of marriage, and declare homosexuality a sin... *could you lose your job - or at least get demoted?* Is eating at Chick-fil-A *now considered offensive?* I heard it said, “Either you side with Chick-fil-A or you don't - but one thing is certain, if you want to continue eating chicken you still need a hen and a rooster.” Could your pro-life views *get you passed over for the next promotion?*... If you pray in the name of Jesus at a school assembly *will you be reprimanded or worse?* If you dared to state at the office party that Jesus is the only way to God... *what would be the reaction?*

If our church refuses to officiate same sex marriages... *could we forfeit our tax-exempt status - or worse, will our pastors be arrested for hate crimes?* If we preach that Muhammed is a liar, and Islam is not true, will our Muslim neighbors respect our freedom of speech... *or will we become targets for terrorism?* If the US elects a Mormon president... *will churches be pressured to soften our stance on Mormonism and call it something other than the cult that it is.* If you teach your kids creation at

home and they go to public school and question evolution... *will they be allowed to do so without be mocked and ridiculed?*

Up until now America has been an anomaly in the history of the Church. Our government has allowed Christians unprecedented freedoms and protection. But over the span of history America has been the exception rather than the rule. Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:12, “All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.” In most places - at most times - this has been the case. *And it might become so again.*

Just yesterday I saw an article that warned of a growing hostility in America toward Christianity. This is certainly true today in places like Pakistan, Iran, Indonesia. There it's commonplace for Christians to be martyred. You only hear about it if they happen to be Americans. Local believers are killed with impunity. In fact, Regents University did a study, and concluded that in the year 2000, there were 165,000 Christians worldwide who died for the cause of Christ. Since 70 AD over 70 million Christians have been martyred for refusing to denounce their faith in Jesus.

This is all why we need to take heed to our Lord's words in verse 10, “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.” Notice, our Lord

Jesus sees the current tribulation as a test... Persecution is always a way to test a believer...

It's a test of our love. What do we love more? Our job, our popularity, our friends, our safety... or Jesus? **It's a test of our values.** What's more important? Accolades in this life, or a crown in the life to come? Do we live for man's approval or heaven's reward? **It's a test of our faith.** Who do we fear more? The enemy who can end our life on Earth, or the God who will determine our eternal destiny? *Opposition is a test.*

In verse 10 Jesus warns Smyrna, *"You will have tribulation ten days."* This may've referred to an approaching trial local believers would have to face. Or it could speak of the church age we call Smyrna. Church historians have identified ten *"days"* or waves of persecution initiated by the Roman government during the second and third centuries AD. At the time of John's writing the church was experiencing the second swell of trouble at the hand of the Emperor Domitian. Polycarp died in the fourth wave under the tyranny of Marcus Aurelius. The final attack of Roman sanctioned tribulation occurred under Emperor Diocletian, 312 AD.

A Church leader living at the time of Polycarp, wrote of the effect the persecution was having on Christianity. It was Tertullian, who authored the famous line, **"The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church."** In other words, the more the church was assaulted the more it grew. Tribulation drives away the insincere, and hypocrite. It strips the self-seeker of his motivation. A persecuted church becomes a purer

church - and a purer church is a more powerful and vibrant church. It's true, "Persecution knocks the straddlers off the fence." It's no surprise, *tribulation brings multiplication.*

This is why Jesus tells us when persecution comes "*Do not fear...*" In the wake of hard times *passion is purified, numbers are multiplied, Jesus is glorified.* Persecution, big or small, is an opportunity to prove our loyalty to the Master and win "*the crown of life.*"

I saw where the Olympic Gold Medals passed out in London weren't exactly gold... The actual medal consisted of 92.5% silver, and less than 2% gold. Talk about a let down! The Gold Medal is only 1.34% gold. Well, in contrast there'll be no let downs in heaven. The crown of life is 100% life. *It's eternal life, victorious life, abundant life, spiritual life, peaceful life, thrilling life, overflowing life, joyous life, reigning life.*

This is why Jesus says in verse 11, "*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*" Today's subject is not what we normally think about unless it's forced upon us. But we need to take heed.

Jesus closes His letter to the Church at Smyrna with a tremendous promise, "*He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.*" "*The second death*" is a technical term. We find it three more times in Revelation. In 20:14 it's synonymous with the day when Death and Hades are thrown into the lake of fire. It's the ultimate

punishment. *“The second death”* is the start of what we might call “eternal damnation.” In essence, Jesus is telling us don’t be afraid to die.

Realize, worse things can happen to you than death. You can almost die and live your life as a vegetable... You can be tortured before you die... You watch your love ones die before you... You can get stuck in an elevator with a Tech fan singing Rambling Wreck over and over. *It’s the only song they know. There are plights worse than death!*

Don’t worry about *the first death* - it’s unavoidable. All it does is separate us temporarily from our bodies. Rather, be concerned about *“the second death”* - this is spiritual death - eternal separation from God. Jesus died to save us from this death. Avoid it at all costs. There’s an old saying, *“Born once die twice. Born twice die once.”* If you’re born again by God's Spirit you may still die physically, but you’ll live forever spiritually.

Today, there’s a two-fold challenge... First, if persecution ever knocks on our door let’s be ready! Let’s do a little soul-searching, and count the cost! And let’s pray for the Church of Smyrna all around the world. Right now there are believers in imminent danger. Let’s pray God gives them a revelation of the Triumphant King, and by faith help them overcome!