



**Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church**  
Sanford, North Carolina

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**What the Spirit Is Saying to the Churches:  
No Need to Fear!  
Revelation 2:8-11**

This past Friday we marked the eighth anniversary of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on our nation. Nearly 3,000 innocent people died in those attacks when nineteen Al-Qaeda terrorists hijacked four jet airliners. As you well remember, they crashed two of them into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. They crashed the third one into the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia, just outside Washington, DC.

The fourth plane crashed in a field in rural Pennsylvania. When the passengers somehow learned what was going on and realized that the hijackers had rerouted the plane toward our nation's capital, some of them courageously decided to try to retake control of the plane. Though they all died in the attempt, they became heroes, because it's believed that the hijackers intended to crash that plane into either the Capitol building or the White House.

They knew they were going to die; it was just a matter of when and how. They chose to die in an attempt to prevent the deaths of others and the destruction of many of our nation's leaders. They believed that this was a cause worth dying for.

I hope you gave thanks for their courage Friday, even as you remembered all the innocent victims of these cowardly attacks.

Today we're continuing our journey through the letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation.

We began this journey by looking at John's vision of the sender of these letters, the risen Lord Jesus in all his glory, walking among his churches. Last Sunday we heard his message through John to the church at Ephesus, commending them for their orthodoxy and faithfulness to right belief and teaching, but calling them to repent for having abandoned the love they had at first.

Today we turn to the shortest of these letters—the letter to the church at Smyrna. And you may be wondering what the connection is between those heroes of 9/11 and this letter to the church at Smyrna. It's a message from the risen Lord Jesus to a church about to face intense persecution, reminding them that their relationship with him was worth dying for, and that no matter how hard things got, there was no need to fear.

Listen to what he said (Revelation 2:8-11)<sup>1</sup> . . .

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, Scriptures are from the *New International Version*.

<sup>8</sup> "To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. <sup>9</sup> I know your afflictions and your poverty-- yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. <sup>10</sup> Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.

<sup>11</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.

### ***The church at Smyrna***

We don't know a lot about the church at Smyrna during the first century. The only other place it's ever mentioned in the New Testament is in the list of the seven churches in Revelation 1:11.

We know a little bit about it in the early to mid-second century from four documents found in a collection of ancient Christian writings known as the *Apostolic Fathers*.

There we find a letter from Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch in Syria, addressed to the church in Smyrna. I mentioned his letter to the church in Ephesus in last Sunday's sermon. On his way to Rome to be martyred, he had visited these churches (and several others along the way) and later wrote to them to thank them for their kindness and to encourage them in their own situations. He also wrote a letter at the same time to Polycarp, the bishop of the church in Smyrna. Ignatius wrote these letters around A.D. 108, probably about a dozen years after John wrote Revelation.

Not long after Ignatius' death, Polycarp wrote a letter to the church at Philippi. They had written Polycarp requesting copies of the letters Ignatius had sent to the other churches. Apparently Polycarp had obtained copies of most or all of them, and he was happy to send them copies along with his letter. He also took it as an opportunity to warn the Philippians about certain disorders in their church and to encourage them to remain faithful to Christ.

The other document comes from about A.D. 156, when Polycarp died for his faith in Christ. The church at Philomelium had asked the church at Smyrna to share with them an account of Polycarp's martyrdom. So the Smyrnaeans carefully recorded what had happened based on eyewitness accounts and sent it to them.

As far as the city of Smyrna, it was located about 35 to 40 miles north of Ephesus. It was also a seaport, and was a rather prosperous city commercially. It still exists today as the city of Izmir in Turkey.

Smyrna and Ephesus were somewhat rivals for the honor of being the most important city in Asia. Smyrna had been established several centuries earlier by the Greeks, and had supported Rome before it ever became a world power, building a temple to the goddess Roma around 195 B.C. Then in A.D. 26, the city won the privilege of building a temple to the emperor Tiberius. So it was a center of the worship of both Rome and the emperor.

There was also a strong Jewish presence in Smyrna, and they seemed to have a strong influence with the civil authorities. The letter makes it clear that they were very hostile toward Christians at this time, and even 60 years later some of them actively assisted in the martyrdom of Polycarp.

### *The letter from Jesus*

Now as I said earlier, this is the shortest of the letters to the seven churches. It's also the first of only two letters in which Jesus does not point out some kind of sin or short-coming and call for a change of ways.

As with the first letter, Jesus addressed it "To the angel of the church in Smyrna . . ." (2:8). If, as I think is the case, the *angel* is the bishop or chief pastor of the church, then it might very well have been Polycarp who received it! We're not sure exactly when he became the bishop, but we know he already was when Ignatius wrote to him about twelve years later. According to tradition, Polycarp knew John as his teacher, and as Bruce Metzger notes in his little book on Revelation, both Irenaeus and Tertullian, who were Christian leaders in the late second and early third centuries, said that it was John himself who had consecrated Polycarp as bishop of Smyrna.<sup>2</sup> Since John was writing very late in his life, Polycarp may well have been "the angel of the church at Smyrna" to whom Jesus was giving this message.

Jesus identified himself as he had in John's vision—as "the First and the Last, who died and came to life again" (2:8). This reality of who he is was the foundation for the message he was giving to the Christians in Smyrna.

Jesus told them, "I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich!" (2:9). The word translated "afflictions" in the NIV can also be translated as "oppression" or even "tribulation." What he was talking about was more than just difficulty or hard times; he was talking about an all-out attack, and went on to make it clear that Satan was behind it.

He pointed to the fact that they were really rich because of their relationship with him, even though they were experiencing poverty in the midst of a very affluent society. Part of what they may have been facing was the seizure of their property, as sometimes happened to Christians in the Roman world, or maybe the loss of jobs or business because they were Christians. Whatever the case, they were experiencing some kind of financial oppression. Yet they continued to be rich in what really mattered!

Jesus indicated that Satan was using Jews who had rejected Jesus as the Messiah to bring persecution against them. He described them as "those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan," and said that they were slandering the Christians—apparently bringing accusations against them to the Roman authorities (2:9).

But look at what the crucified and risen Lord Jesus told them: "Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer" (2:10)! Not "what you *might* suffer," but "what you are about to suffer"! The devil was going to put some of them in prison (likely, according to Roman custom, to await trial and the carrying out of their sentence). This would test them. Their tribulation would be intense, but for a definite period of time ("ten days," not a literal ten days, but a limited, relatively short, definite period of time). And then he promised them: "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life."

And that's where the way Jesus identified himself comes in—no matter what happened in between, Jesus is "the First and the Last." He is the one "who died and came to life again"!

They were about to face severe persecution, possibly even death because of their faith in him. They might be called on to die rather than deny him, just as he had died rather than sin by disobeying the Father and what he had sent him to do. But when he died, he didn't stay dead!

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<sup>2</sup> These commentaries have been helpful in my interpretation of this text: Morris Ashcraft, "Revelation" in *the Broadman Bible Commentary*; David Aune, "Revelation" in *The Word Biblical Commentary*; George E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*; Bruce Metzger, *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation*; Charles Talbert, *The Apocalypse: A Reading of the Revelation of John*.

He arose, he came to life again! Death couldn't hold him! And neither can it hold those who are truly faithful to him!

*The Christians in Smyrna had no need to fear death, since they would receive the crown of life.* The crown of life was drawn from the image of ancient athletic contests, where the contestants who won received the victor's crown—the garland presented to those who had been victorious in their contests.

And what was this crown of life? *Eternal life*—sharing in the age of the resurrection, sharing in Christ's resurrection! As Jesus promised, "The one who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death" (2:11).<sup>3</sup> In Revelation 20, John identifies the second death as eternal separation from God in the lake of fire.

### ***The Church at Jonesboro Heights***

So what does all this mean for us today?

"Let the one who has an ear hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches"<sup>4</sup>—that means us! What is the Spirit saying to us through this letter to Smyrna?

I don't know that we're facing much possibility of persecution in our situation, although many of our brothers and sisters throughout the world are. Maybe we should be. George MacLeod once said, "The greatest criticism of the Church today is that no one wants to persecute it: because there is nothing very much to persecute it about."<sup>5</sup>

But even if we're not facing persecution, we do all face trials and at some point *death*. And we don't like it. And sometimes we're *afraid* about it. Augustine once wrote:

It is necessary to die, but nobody wants to. You don't want to, but you are going to, willy-nilly. A hard necessity that is: not to want something that can not be avoided . . . .

We want to reach the kingdom of God, but we don't want to travel by way of death. And yet there stands Necessity saying: "This way, please."

Do you hesitate, man, to go this way, when this is the way that God came to you?<sup>6</sup>

What is the Spirit saying to us? *For us who follow Jesus, there is no need to fear death.* If we are faithful even to death, he will give us the crown of life. No matter what we may face, we can be faithful to Jesus as we trust him to bring us through it, and eventually into the life everlasting.

What Jesus is telling the church in Smyrna can really be summed up well by what I heard one of my seminary New Testament professors, Dr. Malcolm Tolbert, say time and time again: "If you know that you're going to live again, then it really doesn't matter if you die."

And so about 60 years after John wrote Revelation, when Polycarp was an old man, he boldly refused to renounce Christ. Those who arrested him tried to persuade him, then treated him

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<sup>3</sup> My translation.

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<sup>5</sup> George F. MacLeod, *Leadership*, Vol. 2, no. 4. Cited at [http://preachingtoday.com/illustrations/article\\_print.html?id=17570](http://preachingtoday.com/illustrations/article_print.html?id=17570).

<sup>6</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *Encyclopedia of Christian Quotations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 251. Cited at <http://preachingtoday.com/illustrations/search.html?query=Revelation+2%3A8-11&type=scripture&filter=&x=0&y=0&tone=&start=1>.

roughly when he refused. When they led him into the arena, the proconsul tried once again to persuade him. But Polycarp steadfastly refused and said, “For eighty-six years I have been His servant, and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King, who has saved me?”<sup>7</sup>

And as the flames rose around him, I can’t help but wonder if he heard these words again: “Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

“Let the one who has an ear hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

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<sup>7</sup> “Martyrdom of Polycarp” 21.1, in *Apostolic Fathers II*, trans. K. Lake, *Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 341.