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REVELATION 2: 8 – 11

SMYRNA – POOR AND PERSECUTED, BUT RICH

Some of you may remember the name Polycarp. You may have some faint memories of church history lessons, a long time ago. Polycarp was bishop of the church in Smyrna in the beginning of the second century, perhaps already at the time that John wrote Revelation. We know that in his younger years Polycarp was a student of John.

From the book *Martyrium Polycarpi* we know that he died as a martyr in Smyrna. He was burned at the stake in 155 or 156 AD. At that time, he was close to 90 years old.

He had been asked to declare “Caesar is Lord”, but he refused. When he was brought to the crowded stadium, the Roman proconsul urged him: “Swear to deny Christ and I will set you free immediately”. But Polycarp answered: “For more than 86 years I have served him, and he never did me any wrong or harm. How then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?”

When the proconsul pressed on again, the old man answered: “Since you keep urging me to worship the emperor, and since you pretend not to know who and what I am, let it be clear to you: I am a Christian.” The proconsul then continued: “I have wild animals. I will throw you to the lions if you do not repent.”

“Call them”, Polycarp said. “For us to repent from what is good to what is bad is impossible.” The proconsul replied: “Since you don’t fear the wild animals, I will let you be consumed by fire, if you do not repent.”

But Polycarp said: “you threaten me with fire that will burn for a short time and then will die out. But you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. But why do you hesitate – come up with what you want!”

Then the proconsul sent his herald in the middle of the arena, to announce with a loud voice: “Polycarp declares of himself that he is a Christian”. At that moment the large crowd began to shout that Polycarp should be burned at the stake. Soon afterwards the people began to gather wood and branches, eagerly assisting the officials with the preparations. They stripped the old man of all his clothes and tied him on the pile. Thus Polycarp was burned at the stake.

This story of the persecution and the martyrdom of Polycarp happened in Smyrna. It illustrates the circumstances God’s congregation in Smyrna was facing in those days. And we see an accurate reflection of those conditions in Smyrna, as the exalted Christ addresses this church in his second letter of the seven.

Smyrna is one of the oldest cities in Asia Minor. Unlike some of the other places mentioned, Smyrna still exists. Today, in modern-day Turkey, it is called Izmir. It is located about 70 km north of the place where Ephesus was. It is also a city on the coast, with a good size natural harbour, and it is partly built on the slopes of the Pagos hill. The citadel on top of this hill was called “the crown of Smyrna”.

From the very beginning of Rome’s rise-to-power, the city of Smyrna had been a loyal ally of the Romans. The Roman rulers recognized this and awarded the city for its faithfulness. Smyrna’s loyalty to Rome became proverbial in the ancient world, to the point that the city was known by its nickname: “the faithful one”.

Smyrna was also a very prosperous city in those days. It was famous for its athletic games and competitions, its gladiator-fights and other entertain-

ment in the theatre, the stadium, or arena. The city folks enjoyed the good life.

One more detail is necessary to help us get a background picture of the situation and of the circumstances the Christian church was facing there - that is that there was also a significant concentration of Jews living in Smyrna. It was apparently a popular place to settle for Jewish refugees after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

Well then here, in this city, a Christian church was established, most likely by the apostle Paul or one of his companions, when Paul spent a few years in Ephesus on his third missionary journey. In Acts 19:10 we learn that at that time *all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.*

When you read this letter, you will notice that the exalted Christ does not rebuke or criticize the church in Smyrna. He does not mention any dominant flaws or weaknesses that threaten the life of the congregation. That is remarkable. All he does is encourage and comfort them. That does not mean that everything was perfect in Smyrna, but this was obviously what they needed most.

The Christian church in a pagan society will face lots of challenges, and Smyrna is a perfect example of this. There is some serious persecution going on. And this can be very discouraging. You become a Christian believer, a follower of Jesus Christ, and you expect your life to be better, happier, and more joyful. But it is not! It is trouble, and over time it gets even worse. That is disappointing and it could easily make the believers in Smyrna abandon the journey to the New Jerusalem, unless they remain faithful!

And Christ knows this. He is fully aware of what they are going through. They are suffering. And it is not only the persecution from the authorities. There is also the hostile attitude in society. It can come from your co-workers or your neighbours, even from your family. And on top of that you have to deal with the slanderous attacks of others who claim to worship God.

That is why Christ chooses to present himself to the Smyrna congregation with this self-designation: *him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life.* In this way he connects with this congregation. They see them-

selves under deadly attacks from all sides, but their exalted Christ understands that. And he gives hope.

As *the First and the Last*, Jesus Christ stresses his sovereign control over all of history. He emphasizes that, from the beginning to the end, everything is in his hand, including the afflictions, the persecution the church is facing.

That *he died and came to life again* shows his victory over the power of death. And because of this victory in his own death AND resurrection, Jesus – as the one who lives forever – is now able to say, as he does here, “*be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life*. Look at me, and trust that because of me, death will not have the final say in your life either.”

This self-presentation shows again that he can say beyond any doubt: *I know*. Yes, it comes back again and again, in all these letters: The exalted Christ knows! “I know. I know everything,” says Jesus, “everything about your congregation, everything in your congregation I know. Everything in your own life I know.”

This means, as we saw already when we read the letter to Ephesus, that we cannot really hide anything. You can make yourself look better, but it is no use. Christ sees it anyway. That can be daunting and outright scary. He looks right through all the pious cover-ups of how we really feel, who we really are, and what we really think.

But the fact that Christ says: *I know* can also be incredibly encouraging and comforting, even relaxing. You do not have to present yourself stronger and more confident than you really feel. “Be yourself,” says Jesus Christ, “because I know already how you feel. I know what you are struggling with. I know the things you have to deal with, and worry about, from the young children to the parents and to the seniors. And also here in Smyrna – I know everything. Nothing escapes me. And I don’t overlook the suffering of my people.”

Then, when we zero in on the specific circumstances the church in Smyrna found itself in, the exalted Christ says: I know these three things about you, the three things that make your life miserable: *your tribulation, your poverty, and the slander of those that hate you, although they claim to love God*. Now

especially the latter, that slander from those who claim to love God, – that’s a stab in the back, that hurts.

It sounds like they are having a rough time up in Smyrna.

Is this not often the experience when you openly express your faith in Jesus Christ and try to live it? You can get a wide range of reactions, and often, but not always, it is negative. To be a Christian and to be open about it is not so easy all the time.

Let us take a closer look.

I know your tribulation, says Christ. It is true, of course, that Christ knows all of the afflictions you are dealing with in your life. But in this context, in this situation, the word “tribulation” or “persecution” is telling. Revelation uses the word ‘tribulation’ more often, whenever it speaks about the distress of the church in the last days, the final phase of history, between Jesus’ first and second coming.

It is still very much a terrible reality in our world today. Reports tell us that the Christian faith is the most persecuted religion in the world today when it comes to the number of countries and the number of people affected by it. It is not something that you and I experience so directly in a western country like Canada. But let us not forget that this is a daily reality for your brothers and sisters in the faith in North Korea, Pakistan, Somalia, Iran, or many other countries.

What’s going on in Smyrna? Because of its loyalty to Rome and to the Roman Empire, ‘emperor worship’ was a big deal in Smyrna. We have noticed it in the story of Polycarp’s martyrdom. The city was a centre of this kind of worship in Asia.

If you would refuse to worship the Roman emperor you would be accused of political disloyalty. If you were a Christian this would land you in jail, with the demand: “deny Jesus as Lord, worship the emperor as your Lord, with just a tiny bit of incense, then you’ll be free.” They made it really easy to deny Jesus. Such was Satan’s strategy, luring people into denying Christ by just a minimal participation in emperor worship.

But if you did not, you would be killed. In this city full of worship devoted to the emperor, worshipping and honouring Jesus Christ as Lord of all earthly powers and doing so in public, triggered not only a lot of hatred and resistance, but also oppressive measures from the authorities.

Here in Canada we do not do emperor worship. But the resistance against the Christian faith, and sometimes even specific measures from the authorities to restrict the church in its freedom to express our Christian faith in public, is here too. Even if it comes out in what many would call ‘minor things’. One example could be a municipal decision that, in new suburban developments, no properties will be made available to build churches.

Or think of the ongoing concern for restrictive measures to limit the freedom of churches and ministers not to officiate at same-sex marriages. Or some Parliamentarian floats the idea that it is time to put an end to the financial privileges of churches, such as tax exemption, or tax-deductible donations. Do we call these things “persecution”? That sounds like a big word for those unpleasant experiences.

But the question is and will be: Are we willing and ready in our comfortable church communities to obey God more than any human authority, even if that means saying ‘no’ to what authorities, legislators, or courts decide?

I also know your poverty, says Christ. That is real poverty he is talking about. Smyrna was a prosperous city, but apparently Christian believers did not share in this wealth. They had little material possessions. From an earthly point of view, when you look at the possibility to enjoy the good things in life, becoming a Christian in Smyrna was a real sacrifice. And that is not easy.

Now, they were probably pretty poor already to begin with when it came to earthly possessions. As is so often the case, also today, usually a new church plant does not attract the rich and famous in society, but more often the poor and struggling.

But on top of that, because they became Christians, they were facing more problems. Some lost their job. Others saw their business go down-hill because the customers did not come back, or their suppliers no longer want-

ed their business. And then the social intimidation: co-workers who would pester them; neighbours who would shun them or ridicule them.

Today you can run into similar attitudes at work or in school. Or think of the way in which the media, TV, magazines, and websites ridicule and criticize religion in general, but often the Christian faith and the Bible in particular.

But it does not only come from the authorities or from your hostile neighbours. There is more going on in Smyrna. *I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not*, says Christ.

Who is he talking about? Some see it as a conflict between the Christians and the Jews as an ethnic group. But that is too simple. Many of those ethnic Jews would have accepted Jesus as Saviour and joined the church. In addition, about ethnic Jews you cannot really say, *they are not Jews*.

No, it is about 'Jews' as the name for God's people, 'spiritual Jews', the "synagogue of God", so to speak. In a similar way the apostle Paul speaks about Christians as 'Abraham's descendants' (Galatians 3:7-9, 29). And in Revelation the Christian Church is the new Israel, with all faithful Christian believers presented and listed as 144,000 members of the twelve tribes of Israel (Rev. 7).

Well, because of this claim, those among the ethnic Jews that rejected Jesus as the Saviour became really hostile. Throughout the Book of Acts, you see the same pattern in reaction to Paul's preaching of the gospel. Antichristian Jews respond very strongly to the gospel, stressing that they alone are God's covenant people.

But this is a false claim, says Christ. *They are not*. The true Israelites, the true Jews, in the sense of "God's people", are those that follow Jesus, the Lamb of God, who came to take away our sin. The true "synagogue of the Lord" is the congregation that worships the Saviour Jesus Christ, made up of Jews AND Greeks.

Now, here is the issue. Perhaps in a city like Smyrna, full of aggressive paganism and emperor worship, Christians and Jews could have sort of supported each other as minority groups. They were both facing confrontation with the pagan pressure to cave in and assimilate.

But no, on the contrary, these antichristian Jews *slander* God's people. In Rev. 13 the same word is translated as "blaspheming" and in Rev. 16 as "cursing God".

It is a strong word that pictures fanatic and malicious opposition to Jesus Christ and to the gospel of salvation. They did what they could to give the church a bad reputation in town and to make life for Christian believers as miserable as possible.

And here again, our situation is different today. But in our secular world of aggressive atheism you will hear stories that slanderously twist the gospel, that give a false image of God. Books, articles and blogs describe Christians as a bunch of hypocrites, the Christian faith as a scam, and the church as a club that wants your money but does not care for your needs. Read 1 Peter 4. This kind of suffering, this being insulted for the name of Christ, as described by the apostle Peter, is still happening.

In Smyrna these (antichristian) Jews claimed to serve the one true God. But they are the opposite, says Christ: *they are a synagogue of Satan*. Now that's a harsh and offensive way of putting it. But remember – this does not come from some bitter Christian, but from Jesus Christ himself! And he says this because we must recognize who is behind all this hostility. That is Satan, the devil. As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 4:4, *the god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ*.

Indeed, Satan's power is behind the attitude, words, and actions of those who reject Jesus Christ as Saviour and persecute his followers. He will use whatever means he can find to oppose the gospel and destroy the church. Throughout Revelation this comes out again and again.

All this sounds pretty threatening and discouraging. What are we up against? But that is not the whole picture of the church in Smyrna. True, there is poverty and lots of other trouble and misery; they have many reasons to give up.

BUT, says the exalted Christ, *you are rich*. What does he mean – rich in the midst of poverty? This is his point: despite your poverty you do have possessions no one can take away from you. You have treasures that cannot be confiscated. You can call these "spiritual possessions" if you want, but they

are very real. We talk about the life-changing fruits of the grace of God in Jesus Christ: contentment with what God gives, true peace of mind, hands-on love for others.

In 2 Corinthians 8:9 Paul points out that Jesus *became poor to make us rich*.

And in Romans 8:17 he explains that as God's children we are *heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ*. Now that sounds promising.

That is why in 2 Corinthians 6:10 the same apostle can describe Christian believers as *having nothing, and yet possessing everything*.

Here is the question for us: Do we still recognize what makes us rich today, as a middle-class well-to-do church in this super-materialistic world? What is our heart filled with? And what are our lives filled with, as a result of that?

Are we rich in Jesus Christ, or are we as Christians also caught up, just as others around us, in the consumerism and sense of entitlement that drives our society? Some have more earthly possessions than others and some are struggling to make ends meet, but regardless of those circumstances – do we feel that we are rich with possessions no one can take away?

Look around in this world. Some people are so poor – all they have is money. If you do not look to Jesus, you may be as rich as can be, but you do not have much hope for the future. One day whatever you have now will all be gone. But look to Jesus and be content. Your future looks bright, a future filled with joy and without evil or injustice. That is why your exalted Saviour can say this: *You are rich*.

Sounds great. And it is great. But in the meantime, it is still hard to deal with persecution, poverty, and slander. And it will get worse, says Jesus. The hate-campaign is only going to intensify in the final phase of our history. It will not be easy. However, *do not fear what you are about to suffer*. Trust in me as the First and the Last, the One who has everything in his hands, every moment of it!

This is what is going to happen: The devil will give you a hard time. He will attack you with all the hostile powers he can find – the slander of these so-called “Jews”, the hatred of the pagan emperor worshippers – and some of you will end up in prison. That is scary, for the devil is testing you, to see if

he can get you to deny Jesus as Lord. But here is the question: should I make compromises to save my skin? And will you compromise and cave in under the pressure?

“Don’t be frightened,” says Christ. “I will be with you, so that the test of your faith and faithfulness will bring to light your commitment to me. And take courage, it won’t last forever. *You will have this tribulation for 10 days*”. That again is a symbolic number. “10 days” is a complete, but limited timeframe. Christ lets us know that even in times of suffering and persecution he remains in control, not Satan.

“Do not be discouraged,” says Christ, “but *be faithful*. Do not give up, even if you have to pay with your life. Yes – that might happen. But hang in there. Stay the course, whatever happens.” Jesus says this, not because we are so strong. We are not.

No, he can say this, because he is strong. And he will hold on to those who belong to him and are loyal to him.

The city of Smyrna was well-known for its faithfulness to Rome, and was actually quite proud of this loyalty. But the church should always remember that in the end the only loyalty that really matters is loyalty to Jesus Christ, even if this requires the highest price – the price of your life. After all, death is a defeated enemy.

Remain faithful to your Saviour in all circumstances because such faithfulness leads to victory. Jesus died and came to life. In this way he “models”, so to speak, the way to the victory of life for people that are facing hatred, persecution, and death.

This victory comes by what seems to be defeat, like Jesus’ death on the cross.

But he arose victoriously. And so, as Christian believers you do not win the victory of life by violence or power, but only by *being faithful unto death*. That is the pattern of the crucified, risen and exalted Christ. For, says Jesus, then *I will give you the crown of life*. That means: the crown that is true life – life that will never deteriorate or disappear, but will be enjoyed forever.

Jesus promises the victory of life to his persecuted and suffering people as they die for their faith – at that time in the stadiums and arenas of the Ro-

man Empire, today in the dungeons and slave-camps of countries in Asia and Africa. As the One who died and came to life, and so conquered the power of death himself – no one but Christ alone can assure us of this victory. He alone is the ultimate source of true life.

That is why he can also encourage his church then and today with the comforting promise: *The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.*

When you do not give up, do not cave in, but overcome the frightening and discouraging experiences in your life as God's child, and you remain faithful, you may still have to pay with the price of your life. "But don't worry," says Jesus. "That's only the first death. This will separate body and soul. But it is temporary and will bring you beyond the reach of the second death."

This second death is mentioned in Revelation 20 and 21, and is described there as the spiritual death, the eternal death. It says in Rev. 20:14 that on the great day of Jesus' glorious return *death and Hades will be thrown into the lake of fire. This lake of fire is the second death.* This is the horrible destination of all who will not enter the new Promised Land. As it says in Rev. 21:8 of those who have rejected Jesus – *their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death.*

This is the death that will separate God and man. And that is forever!

What is the worst? Not persecution. Not your physical death. You will get through those hardships, as Jesus himself did and came to life again.

No, the worst is to reject Jesus and become unfaithful. For that makes you die the second death. And no one will ever get through that.

Trust that the exalted Christ will fulfil his promise of life. Not by getting you out of trouble, misery, or persecution. He might or he might not. But by encouraging you to remain faithful to him as you are going through those experiences.

Through many dangers, toils and snares, we have already come,

Tis grace that brought us safe thus far, and grace will lead us home.

3. Sometimes Christians make a contrast between defending and promoting purity of doctrine, rejecting false teaching and applying discipline on the one hand, and being a church where love and social compassion are in the centre of everything we do. It is often seen as traditional, conservative versus contemporary and outreach-minded. Is it correct to contrast those things? Explain why or why not. Can you appeal to this letter to Ephesus for this?
4. Seven times we read in Revelation that John was *in the Spirit* and that he saw and heard things *in the Spirit*. What do you think it means “to be in the Spirit”? Discuss the question whether God might use the same experience today to communicate with people.

Chapter 4 – Revelation 2:8-11

1. Are there any aspects of the church-life in Smyrna Christ is pointing at, either negative or positive, that you can also identify in the church you belong to? If so, discuss what they are and how you should deal with these.
2. In Smyrna, the Christians were facing severe persecution. This is a significant aspect of the Christian life throughout history, and is still the case in many parts of the world. What do you think is the secret of believers who remain steadfast and strong in their faith under serious threats? Think of the story of Polycarp.
3. Have you ever experienced negative reactions to your Christian faith and/or Christian life? How did you or would you handle that and deal with it? What makes it hard not to compromise your faith?
4. In the political and economic situations we find ourselves in, here in North America, we enjoy much prosperity, as well as freedom to worship and serve the Lord. Does the call of Christ: *Be faithful unto death...* mean anything for us? Can we do anything with it today?

Chapter 5 – Revelation 2:12-17

1. Are there any aspects of the church-life in Pergamum Christ is pointing at, either negative or positive, that you can also identify in the church you belong to? If so, discuss what they are and how you should deal with these.