

## BE FAITHFUL EVEN TO THE POINT OF DEATH

Revelation 2:8-11

Key Verse: 2:10

*“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 life as your victor’s crown.”*

In this letter to the church of Smyrna, Jesus encourages the believers to be faithful, even to the point of death. We are easily discouraged when we face small sufferings because of our faith. But Jesus says we should not be afraid of what we are about to suffer. Today, let us think about why Jesus wants us to be faithful even to the point of death.

### I. SMYRNA WHERE POLYCARP WAS MARTYRED (8-9)

Look at verse 8. *“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.”* The city of Smyrna was located about 25 miles north of Ephesus. In the Roman period (as it is today), the city had a good harbor on the Aegean Sea. It was famous for its schools of medicine and science. It was one of the most beautiful cities and many Romans as well as Jews came to live there. It boasted a population of 20,000 at that time. The city had several pagan temples, Roman bath houses, and a horse racing stadium. It was called a jewel of Asia Minor. It was the hometown of Homer who wrote Iliad and Odyssey, the second best seller of all time behind the Bible. Today, it is a large modern city of Turkey (called Izmir) with a population of 5 million people. It is known for the disproportionately large number of good-looking women and also as the wedding dress capital of Turkey.

Look at verse 8 again. *“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.”* To the believers of Smyrna, Jesus identified himself as “the First and the Last, who died and came back to life.” Earlier, Jesus introduced himself to the church of Ephesus as the one “who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.” But this time, he identified himself as the First and the Last who died and came to life again. Why? It was because the believers in Smyrna faced death threats everyday because of their faith in Jesus. They needed to hold on to Jesus who is the Creator God, the giver of their lives. Jesus also reminded them that he had died on the cross as the Lamb of God and came back to life on the third day according to the Scriptures. More than anything, the resurrection of Jesus would encourage the believers in Smyrna. If they died, they would live with Christ in eternity.

Look at verse 9. *I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.* The persecutions of the early believers in Smyrna came from two

groups of people in the city. The first group was Jews who slandered and persecuted the Christians. These Jews claimed to be the “true Israel.” But Jesus called them “a synagogue of Satan.” Why? It was because they neither knew God nor loved him. They followed their traditions and laws. They were religious outwardly. But their hearts were far from God. They boasted their circumcision as a mark of God’s chosen people. The problem was that they were circumcised physically but their hearts were not. This is what St. Paul said about their circumcision: “For you are not a true Jew just because you were born of Jewish parents or because you have gone through the Jewish ceremony of circumcision. No, a true Jew is one whose heart is right with God. And true circumcision is not a cutting of the body but a change of heart produced by God's Spirit. Whoever has that kind of change seeks praise from God, not from people” (Ro 2:28-29 NLT). These Jews claimed to be God’s people, but they were not. Instead, they followed the ways of Satan when they persecuted the believers. Most of all, they rejected the Son of God who came to save them from their sin and death. They were just like the Pharisees who persecuted Jesus. They were a synagogue of Satan.

The other group that persecuted the believers were those who supported the emperor worship. We are told that the worship of Roman emperor as god originated in the city of Smyrna. The people of Smyrna wanted to be in good terms with the empire. They began to flatter the Roman soldiers who were stationed there. They suggested that they worship the emperor as god. They demanded the Christians to confess “Caesar is Lord” instead of “Jesus is Lord.” Of course, the emperor loved the idea. But the Christians refused to acknowledge the emperor as god. They refused to worship him. So they were persecuted. Jesus knew their situation very well. He knew their afflictions. He knew their poverty—they were not only persecuted politically, but also economically deprived by the Roman government for their faith. But Jesus told them they were rich as long as they were with him.

The Smyrna church was one of the most persecuted churches in Christian history. Christians there were taken to the amphitheater to be fed to hungry lions while thousands of spectators cheered. Many were boiled in oil and burned at the stake for refusing to renounce Christ. Polycarp was the best known example. Who was Polycarp? He was a Christian leader who lived sometime between AD 70 and 155. He was a critical link between the original apostles and the second generation of believers. The Apostle John raised him to be a disciple of Jesus and appointed him the leader of the Smyrna church. Polycarp fought against the false teachings of Marcion who taught the Gnostic heresies. In his letter to the church of Philippi, Polycarp encouraged the believers there to remain true to faith and to handle financial matters in a godly way. But his greatest spiritual legacy is his martyrdom. He was arrested by the Roman officials at the age of 86. The Roman proconsul named Statius Quadratus, interrogated him in front of an angry mob. Taking pity on the gentle old man, the proconsul tried to find a way to save his life. He first threatened to feed him to wild beasts or burn him at the stake if he did not renounce his faith in Jesus. Polycarp answered, “Your fire burns for an hour and goes out, but the fire of the coming judgment is eternal.” The proconsul said, “Old man, curse Christ, and I will release you.” But Polycarp stood firm and said, “Eighty-six years have I served him, and he never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my king who has saved me?” Finally this man of faith was burned at the stake. It was on Saturday,

February 23<sup>rd</sup>, AD 155. His martyrdom encouraged many other believers to remain faithful to Christ in the midst of fiery persecutions.

What can we learn from Polycarp's martyrdom? The most important thing we should remember about his death is that he died believing that Jesus is "the First and the Last, who died and came back to life." There have been many men and women of faith who died believing this Jesus. They didn't die because our Lord is helpless and powerless. Instead, they died because Jesus is the resurrection and the life. Their lives were cut short by sinful men, but they are with Jesus in heaven to reign with him in eternity. Their deaths are a powerful testament that in Christ to die is to live. Are we willing to die because of our faith in Jesus?

## II. BE FAITHFUL, EVEN TO THE POINT OF DEATH, AND I WILL GIVE YOU LIFE (10-11)

Look at verse 10. *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 life as your victor's crown.*

Jesus knew the situation of the believers in Smyrna. How did he help them to overcome their trials? Let us read verse 10. *"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 life as your victor's crown."* Jesus did not offer human sympathy to the suffering people. He did not say, "I feel so sorry for you." Human sympathy makes us weak. Instead, he wanted them to recognize the work of Satan and endure the persecution to the end.

Jesus wanted them to know about the nature of their suffering. Persecution comes from Satan. The devil would put some of them in prison to test their faith. He also told them that they would *"suffer persecution for ten days."* What does this mean? Persecutions are sometimes intense, but they won't last indefinitely. Persecution of the believers will always have a beginning and an end. God is in firm control of our lives. He allows us to suffer persecutions, but he knows what he is doing.

Today we don't have to face the kind of fiery persecutions that the Christians in Smyrna had to endure, because we live in a country where there is religious freedom. (There are some Christians who face similar persecutions in countries such as Pakistan, Sudan, Nigeria, China, etc.) But we do face various subtle persecutions and temptations such as peer pressure at work and in school, materialism and hedonism of our society. How can we overcome these persecutions and render glory to God? We can overcome external persecutions if we face them with a martyr's attitude, believing that we will be with Jesus. *"Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown."* We don't have to worry about future as long as we have faith in Jesus. He will take care of us. Not only that, he will give us life as our victor's crown. He will wipe away all our tears and give us the crown of life. God is in control and he will give us victory, if we endure to the end. Jesus said this to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be

my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it” (Mk 8:34-35).

The biggest spiritual battle we must fight is often internal in nature. Satan wants us to compromise with this world. He tempts us to live an easygoing life rather than follow the way of cross. He wants us to give in to our sinful desires rather than obey the word of Jesus. I want to ask us a question—“Have we fought a spiritual battle against these enemies to the point of death?” I personally cannot say that I have. So I have heard the voice of Jesus, *“Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor’s crown.”* How can we fight a spiritual battle when we are tempted to give in? Let us remember how Jesus fought an intense battle in the garden of Gethsemane. He prayed earnestly for God’s help to overcome his desire to avoid the cup of suffering. He prayed to obey the will of God. His prayer was so intense that his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground (Lk 22:44). We may not face threat of physical death, but if we compromise our faith even a little bit, we may gradually become Satan’s prey. We have to pray that God may help us to be faithful, even to the point of death. We should not give up when the battle becomes intense. A marathon runner cannot take it easy in the middle of his race, if he wants to receive the victor’s crown. Likewise, we must fight a good fight to the end in order to receive the crown of life.

Look at verse 11. *“Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death.”* Once again Jesus promises that if we have an ear to hear what the Holy Spirit says we can overcome external persecutions. Above all, even if we may die because of our faith, we won’t be hurt at all by the second death. Jesus says in Matthew 10:28, “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”

In conclusion, to live a life of faith is to participate in Jesus’ sufferings. Jesus said we should expect suffering as part of our normal life, not as an exception. Jesus suffered and died. But he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. Our suffering has a meaning and purpose. When we suffer because of our faith, let us remember Jesus who said, *“Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor’s crown.”*