

Revelation 2:8-11

Background on Smyrna

Smyrna was a prominent city on the west coast of Asia 40 miles north of Ephesus. It had a population between 100,000 – 200,000 including a large Jewish presence. Smyrna prided itself on its loyalty to Rome and the imperial cult (worship of the emperor) was prominent there. This created serious difficulty for the Christians living in Smyrna as they would be forced to choose between swearing allegiance to Caesar or being persecuted and even dying for their faith.

Mounce: “[Smyrna’s] strong allegiance to Rome plus a large Jewish population that was actively hostile to the Christians made it exceptionally difficult to live as a Christian in Smyrna.” (*Revelation*, 74)

Polycarp (possibly a disciple of John the Apostle), the Bishop of Smyrna was the most well-known martyr there. See his martyrdom’s story in your handout.

Smyrna is the only 1 of the 7 cities of Revelation still in existence today (beyond archeological ruins). It is modern-day Izmir, the 3rd largest city in Turkey behind Istanbul (sacked by Muslims 1204) and Ankara.

Verse-By-Verse Notes

Verse 8

- * Christ’s self-identification as the One “who died and came to life” would have been encouraging to the Christians in Smyrna who were being martyred for their faith.

Verse 9

- * Christ’s *affirmation* (Smyrna is the only church without a rebuke): Smyrna is faithful in tribulation.
- * Robert Mounce on the poverty of the Smyrnan Christians: “In an antagonistic environment it would be difficult for the Christian to make a living, and thus many were economically destitute.”
- * The false Jews (“those who say they are Jews and are not” were ethnic Jews persecuting Christians. True “Jewishness” is a matter not of ethnicity, but of the heart. (see Romans 2:28-29)

Verse 10

- * Christ’s *admonition*: do not fear what you are about to suffer.
- * “10 days” most likely refers to a *definite* but brief season of persecution, not 10 literal consecutive days.
- * “Be faithful unto death” is Christ’s call to *persevere*

Verse 11

- * A general call to all believers who hear to persevere.
- * The second death refers to the final and ultimate death of all the wicked in the lake of fire (see Rev. 20:14).

The Big Takeaway: *“Jesus is worth dying for. And if he is worth dying for, then he is worth living for Only those who are gripped by something worthy more to them than life can be truly courageous. And courage is precisely what Jesus the church in Smyrna to . . . He is proclaiming to them that he is better than life.” (Jim Hamilton)*

Testimony of Polycarp's Martyrdom (2nd century Christian)

Approximately 60 years after John wrote these words to the church at Smyrna, there would indeed be a man “who would not be afraid of what you are about to suffer” and who was “faithful until death.” He was their pastor. His name was Polycarp. Irenaeus, who heard him teach, said he had been a disciple of John. Pastor Polycarp was greatly loved and respected by his people. However, the citizens of Smyrna and their governmental official did not share their sentiment. In AD 155 Polycarp would be arrested, quickly tried, and martyred. He was burned at the stake and then stabbed to finish the job. Below is the record of his death—the oldest account of a Christian dying for the Lord Jesus outside the New Testament.

Polycarp, when he first heard of it, was not perturbed, but desired to remain in the city. But the majority induced him to withdraw, so he retired to a farm not far from the city and there stayed with a few friends, doing nothing else night and day but pray for all men and for the churches throughout the world, as was his constant habit.... Forthwith those searching for him arrived. And when they did not find him, they seized two young slaves, one of whom confessed under torture. For it was really impossible to conceal him, since the very ones who betrayed him were of his own household.... Late in the evening they came up with him and found him in bed in the upper room of a small cottage. Even so he could have escaped to another farm, but he did not wish to do so, saying, “God’s will be done.” Thus, when he heard of their arrival, he went downstairs and talked with them, while those who looked on marveled at his age and constancy, and at how there should be such zeal over the arrest of so old a man. Straightway he ordered food and drink, as much as they wished, to be set before them at that hour, and he asked them to give him an hour so that he might pray undisturbed. And when they consented, he stood and prayed—being so filled with the grace of God that for two hours he could not hold his peace, to the amazement of those who heard. And many repented that they had come to get such a devout old man.

When at last he had finished his prayer, in which he remembered all who had met with him at any time, both small and great, both those with and those without renown, and the whole [universal] church throughout the world, the hour of departure having come, they mounted him on an ass and brought him into the city.... There the chief of the police, Herod, and his father, Nicetas, met him and transferred him to their carriage, and tried to persuade him, as they sat beside him, saying, “What harm is there to say ‘Lord Caesar,’ and to offer incense and all that sort of thing, and to save yourself?”

At first he did not answer them. But when they persisted, he said, “I am not going to do what you advise me.”

Then when they failed to persuade him, they uttered dire threats and made him get out with such speed that in dismounting from the carriage he bruised his shin. But without turning around, as though nothing had happened, he proceeded swiftly, and was led into the arena, there being such a tumult in the arena that no one could be heard ... and when finally he was brought up, there was a great tumult on hearing that Polycarp had been arrested. Therefore, when he was brought before him, the proconsul asked him if he were Polycarp. And when he confessed that he was, he tried to persuade him to deny [the faith], saying, “Have respect to your age”—and other things that customarily follow this, such as, “Swear by the fortune of Caesar; change your mind”; ... the proconsul was insistent and said: “Take the oath, and I shall release you. Curse Christ.”

Polycarp said: “Eighty-six years I have served him, and he never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” ... The proconsul said: “I have wild beasts. I shall throw you to them, if you do not change your mind.”

But he said: “Call them. For repentance from the better to the worse is not permitted us; but it is noble to change from what is evil to what is righteous.”

And again [he said] to him, “I shall have you consumed with fire, if you despise the wild beasts, unless you change your mind.”

But Polycarp said: “The fire you threaten burns but an hour and is quenched after a little; for you do not know the fire of the coming judgment and everlasting punishment that is laid up for the ungodly. But why do you delay? Come, do what you will.”

And when he had said these things and many more besides he was inspired with courage and joy, and his face was full of grace, so that not only did it not fall with dismay at the things said to him, but on the contrary, the proconsul was astonished, and sent his own herald into the midst of the arena to proclaim three times: “Polycarp has confessed himself to be a Christian.”

When this was said by the herald, the entire crowd of Gentiles and Jews who lived in Smyrna shouted with uncontrollable anger and a great cry: “This one is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our gods, who teaches many not to sacrifice nor to worship.”

Such things they shouted and asked the official Philip that he let loose a lion on Polycarp. But he said it was not possible for him to do so, since he had brought the wild-beast sports to a close. Then they decided to shout with one accord that he burn Polycarp alive.... Then these things happened with such dispatch, quicker than can be told—the crowds in so great a hurry to gather wood and kindling from the workshops and the baths, the Jews being especially zealous, as usual, to assist with this.... Straightway then, they set about him the material prepared for the pyre. And when they were about to nail him also, he said: “Leave me as I am. For he who grants me to endure the fire will enable me also to remain on the pyre unmoved, without the security you desire from the nails.”

So they did not nail him, but tied him. And with his hands put behind him and tied, like a noble ram out of a great flock ready for sacrifice, a burnt offering ready and acceptable to God, he looked up to heaven and said:

“Lord God Almighty, Father of thy beloved and blessed Servant Jesus Christ, through whom we have received full knowledge of thee, ‘the God of angels and powers and all creation’ and of the whole race of the righteous who live in thy presence: I bless thee, because thou hast deemed me worthy of this day and hour, to take my part in the number of the martyrs, in the cup of thy Christ, for ‘resurrection to eternal life’ of soul and body in the immortality of the Holy Spirit; among whom may I be received in thy presence this day as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, just as thou hast prepared and revealed beforehand and fulfilled, thou that art the true God without any falsehood. For this and for everything I praise thee, I bless thee, I glorify thee, through the eternal and heavenly High Priest, Jesus Christ, thy beloved Servant, through whom be glory to thee with him and Holy Spirit both now and unto the ages to come. Amen.”

And when he had concluded the Amen and finished his prayer, the men attending to the fire lighted it...

But the jealous and malicious evil one ... pled with the magistrate not to give up his body, “else,” said he, “they will abandon the Crucified and begin worshiping this one.” This was done at the instigation and insistence of the Jews, who also watched when we were going to take him from the fire, being ignorant that we can never forsake Christ, who suffered for the salvation of the whole world of those who are saved, the faultless for the sinners, nor can we ever worship any other. For we worship this One as Son of God, but we love the martyrs as disciples and imitators of the Lord, deservedly so, because of their unsurpassable devotion to their own King and Teacher. May it be also our lot to be their companions and fellow disciples! (“Martyrdom of Polycarp,” *Early Church Fathers*, 150–55)

Jesus said, “If the world hates you, understand that it hated Me before it hated you.... Remember the word I spoke to you: ‘A slave is not greater than his master’ ” ([John 15:18, 20](#)).