

Today we've come to the 2nd, of 7 letters, that Jesus dictated to John, for 7 churches in what they then called "Asia" – we call it "Turkey". And I said last week, "Each week as we read these 7 letters, it's going to be like waiting for the mailman to come", because these letters aren't just for the churches in Turkey back in John's day – they're also written for the church of today.

And I reckon that we're going to discover, that one or more of these letters from Jesus are to our church. And each week as we read these letters, we're going to be asking ourselves the question, "Is this a letter from Jesus, to us?":

- Is it a letter to Bush Disciples?
- Is it a letter to one of the churches who are listening to this on video
- Or, is it a letter to a church of somebody who is listening to this on their iPod?

And today's letter, is the letter to the church at Smyrna.

Let me read it:

Revelation 2:8–11 (ESV)

⁸ "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: 'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.

⁹ " 'I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰ Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹ He who has an ear, let him hear

what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.'

When I first began preparing for today, I quickly read through the letter to the church at Smyrna, and I **immediately** thought to myself, "Right, well I don't need to spend too much time on **that** one". I didn't feel it was relevant for us – After all, it's about "persecution", and **our** church isn't being persecuted.

But then I stopped and prayed about it, and thought about it...

And I found myself wondering, "What if the church at Smyrna had the same attitude as me?" What if **they'd** just dismissed this letter out of hand... How would they of ever been ready for the persecution when it hit 'em? And it did hit 'em. And it went on for centuries.

In the second century, Polycarp was the Christian Bishop of Smyrna. And somewhere around the year 156AD Polycarp was burned at the stake and was pierced with a spear for refusing to burn incense to the Roman Emperor. He said, "86 years I have served Him, and He never once wronged me. How can I blaspheme my King, who saved me?"

And **much** of the Book of Revelation, is about preparing the church, for the persecution that is to come. In fact, it's not just Revelation – a lot of what we read in the New Testament, is doing exactly that...

I preach my way through **whole** books of the Bible, so we don't miss anything out – that way I preach on topics just as often as what **God** wants to bring them up. And it seems to

me, that **much** more often than what I would choose to do it, we're learning about persecution.

The persecutions of the disciples of Jesus, will increase. And the purpose of this book of the Bible, is to prepare the Christian church – that is the disciples of Jesus (even us here), for persecution. And the church at Smyrna, was one of the first churches in its region, to encounter **severe** persecution, including victimisation, imprisonment, social and financial persecution and **execution**.

So, this letter was readying them, for the time of persecution that was **right** on their doorstep. They'd already had little glimpses of it, but in the near future, it was going to get far worse. And I guess for us here, we know there **are** places in the world where persecution **is** severe. And let us not minimise what true persecution is, by claiming that **we're** being persecuted. But we do catch little glimpses of it here.

But the Revelation of Jesus Christ is telling us to expect these persecutions to increase. And most of us (when we think about persecutions), we might say *“Well, I **hope** I'll remain faithful to the Lord... But how will any of us know, until we're put to the test?”*

And that, is why lessons like today are so very important for us. You see, Jesus isn't “teaching us to be brave” – it's about “increasing our faith”. But this “increase in faith”, might not be the kind of increase in faith we're expecting. It's not an increase in faith that “Hey it's not going to happen to us” – that's not an increase in faith...

The increase in faith, is to shift what we believe about life and death – about the present and eternity, so that when persecution does happen, we'll stand firm, on the eternal promises of God, and win.” We might die. But isn't it wonderful, that physical death of either us or our loved ones, is the very worst the Devil can do. *To use the phrase that the Salvation Army like to use – “Death is a promotion to glory”.*

So, let's get into it: As with the other letters, the Letter to the church at Smyrna, begins with Jesus describing Himself. And as He describes Himself, we're already getting a little bit of a hint, as to what kind of faith He's going to be pointing us towards.

He says: **'The words of the first and the last**, Alright, Jesus is assuring them, that He is the divine sovereign (the King) over history. He is the First and the Last. Jesus Christ is the Alpha and the Omega; He is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Nothing is ever going to happen to the Smyrnians, that He doesn't allow.

He also described Himself, as the one **who died and came to life**. So, what sort of faith do you suppose, He's pointing us towards – the faith of the resurrection (of course). The Smyrnians too, even if they died for their faith, will win eternal life, because they've remained faithful (but I'm getting a bit ahead of myself).

So He describes Himself. Next, He congratulates them for their good works. And as He does this, we can learn a little bit

about the situation the Smyrnians are already in. He said:

9 " 'I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

Let me explain this:

In the early years of the Christian church, and probably still to some extent, today, the Jews **hated** Christians. "Hate" is a very strong word, and I don't use it lightly. It began with the crucifixion of Jesus, and then you had zealots like **Saul** (who later became a Christian himself, and changed his name to Paul), But before he became a Christian, **Saul** used to travel from city to city, hunting Christians down, to have them arrested. And at times, he liked to oversee their execution.

Why did they hate the Christians so? Well in their view, these Christians were corrupting, and making a mockery out of their Jewish faith. These Christians, were laying claim that this Jesus (who in their eyes, was a blasphemous criminal) was the Messiah – And the Jews wouldn't have it.

And then to make matters worse, from **their** perspective, these Christians were trying to steal people away from Judaism to worshipping Jesus. And they were preaching to the Gentiles, and bringing them in to this faith in the Jewish God, but they weren't making them keep all of the rules and regulations... And they hated it. They were filled with jealousy, and venom...

And even today, the Jews don't want Christians to be dabbling in their traditions. *For example, sometimes on the Thursday night before Good Friday, some churches have a kind of*

Passover Meal (called the “Passover Seder”). And the Jewish community are pretty much offendedⁱⁱ by that, and so some denominations have said “We won’t do it, because it offends you.”

So, how **were** the Christians being persecuted in Smyrna? Well, we’re talking about a time, in the Roman world, where “Emperor worship” is just getting a bit of a go-on. And it was becoming law, that every individual, was to worship the Emperor... Except for the Jews.

The Jews were given special dispensation – they were allowed to make a sacrifice to Caesar, to honour him as their **ruler** – not as their godⁱⁱⁱ. Everybody else had to honour Caesar as their god.

Now, up until this point, Christianity had been seen as a sect of Judaism and so they flew under the radar of Rome, and **they** weren’t being forced to honour Caesar as a god either.

And one very likely scenario, is that the local Jews started dobbing the Christians in, to the Roman leaders, and in fact, there’s evidence of this happening^{iv}. “***They’re not Jews. They’re not one of us. They shouldn’t be let off from worshipping Caesar.***” And they’d dob them in, and stir up controversy around them, with all sorts of slander...

And so it appears, that the persecution, was by the hands of the Roman authorities, but at the instigation and satisfaction, of the Jews...

And that's probably why Jesus said that He **knows the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.** The local Jewish synagogue, weren't doing God's work – they were doing the work of the Devil. They weren't meeting as God's people – they were meeting as the Devil's people.

That's a pretty harsh thing to say, but it's very like Jesus to say it – He's said it before: In John Chapter 8, Jesus had an argument with the Jewish leaders, and Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham's children, you'd be doing the works that Abraham did, but instead you're trying to kill me. And He went on to say, “If God was your father, you'd love me, because I came from God. Your father is the Devil.”...

And as we get further into this book of Revelation, we're going to discover who is behind the persecution of the church, and it's not going to be any surprise to us – it's Satan himself. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus had said that there is a time that is coming when : ^{Matthew 10:21} **Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death,²² and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.**

What possible event could make something like that happen? – that even our close family, would betray us unto death (just because we're followers of Jesus)? This is what a spiritual attack looks like. I suspect Satan gets blamed for a lot of our own bad choices; and for our own rebellion against God; and for a lot of “just the common toughness of life”...

But here we're left with no doubt – the persecution of the disciples of Jesus Christ, is a spiritual attack – it's an attack from the Devil himself.

So, what tribulation had they been suffering, up until now? (tribulation means: oppression; affliction) How were they being oppressed? How were they being afflicted?... Well, it was actually pretty nasty stuff. Economic hardship for starters. *Imagine what it would be like, if you were banned from trading; and nobody was allowed to employ you; ... there was no unemployment benefits; no pension; Imagine that you have no way to feed your family – and you become utterly destitute...*

By the way, as the influence of Islam has grown throughout the world (in recent years), and especially where Sharia law and Jihad is in process, Christians are sometimes given 3 choices^v:

- 1. Convert to Islam*
- 2. Execution / prison*
- 3. Dhimmitude. Where you become a second class citizen; you lose a lot of your rights; you become 'fair game' to criminals and thugs and you won't get protected; you get taxed a lot higher because you're not a Muslim; and you're not allowed to visibly practice your faith; in extreme circumstances, it can be much like slavery. Dhimmitude.*

And I suspect **that's** the sort of conditions that the Church in Smyrna were under. And Jesus said, I know **your poverty (but you are rich)**. By God's standards:

- You don't have to have a big bank account to be rich.
- You don't need tens of thousands of acres to be rich;
- You don't need a nice car; or a fancy house; or a big share portfolio
- You don't have to have access top-tier health care;
- or to be able to afford to go to go to University to be rich...
- In fact, our families may have gone to bed with hunger-pains because they haven't had enough to eat, and yet, in Jesus Christ, we are rich...

Now, this flies in the face of the whole prosperity doctrine, which is so popular in much of the world today. The prosperity doctrine says "God wants you to be rich!" – and that's true... But it's not **physical** wealth the Lord is concerned with:

- The Lord wants us to be rich in love
- He wants us to be rich in grace
- He wants us to be rich in eternal life
- He wants us to be rich in good works
- He wants us to be rich in faith

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Mark 8:36 For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?

And so Jesus congratulated them: That according to the world's standards, they were poor, but they were rich where it counted...

In a few weeks time, we're going to be reading another letter – the letter to the church in Laodicea. Only in that letter, Jesus is going to be getting' up 'em them, because the opposite, for

them, is true – They prided themselves on their wealth, but Jesus could see that they were spiritually bankrupt... But that's for another week.

Let's come back to the church at Smyrna: Jesus didn't have a bad word to say about the church at Smyrna.

Some people reckon, "If you're following God's will, everything's going to work out just fine, and it's not going to be hard work." And they talk about the open door / closed door principal. In my experience (and Biblically), **sometimes** that's true – **most often** it is not... There is nothing easy about the Christian life. And the church at Smyrna, is an excellent example of this... Jesus didn't have a bad word to say about them... And yet all of this hardship was coming upon them... Why?

Well, the Devil hates it, when Christians are faithful to God, and that's where he attacks. There were only 2 churches out of the 7, that Jesus didn't have a bad word to say to, and both of them were being persecuted.

And it was going to get worse!

Jesus said to them, "¹⁰ **Do not fear**" And what would we expect Him to follow that up with? Don't fear – it's all but done now; Don't fear – things are going to get better – the persecution's just about finished; Don't fear – I will save you from suffering..... No...

He says: ¹⁰ **Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into**

prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Do you understand what He's saying here? Don't be afraid.... Your suffering's going to get a whole lot worse, and some of you are going to be killed... So don't be afraid...

Are you crazy????!!!

Well, by worldly standards, that **is** crazy. But by faith, the Smyrnians will not be afraid, because by remaining faithful to the Lord – even if they or their family are executed – they win eternal life.

Jesus said, “**I will give you the crown of life.**”. The Greek word used there for “crown” isn't a ‘kingly’ crown – What it is, is *the wreath of leaves that would be placed on the head of the winner at an athletic games*^{vi} . (a victor's crown – a gold medal)

You die, but you win.

But let's back-track a bit: He said there that they would be tested for 10 days (that doesn't sound long, does it?)... Now I can't be certain, but I sorta suspect that's not a literal 10 days. The Book of Revelation, takes us back quite often, to quotes from the Old Testament. And particularly to the Book of Daniel. And in the book of Daniel, there was a period of 10 days, that was a time of testing.

And I suspect, that what Jesus is saying here, is this time of severe affliction, is a test. What was being tested? Their faithfulness. Would a true disciple of Jesus, really remain

faithful, if their very lives are at risk??? And they passed the test. They proved to be faithful.

This kind of faithfulness, is not just bravery - it's a faithfulness that comes about, by truly knowing, that Jesus is our saviour. Life is short. Eternity is forever... Jesus has saved us from death – it's truly believing this.

And Jesus gives **us** a challenge, to listen to what He's saying, and to accept it: **¹¹ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.'**

We're going to find out more about this “second death” later in Revelation. But to put it simply, “the second death” is Hell. And Hell, is a very real place of everlasting torment.

In the 2nd Century, when Polycarp was threatened with fire, he replied, “You threaten me with a fire that burns for a season, and after a little while is quenched; but you are ignorant of the fire of everlasting punishment that is prepared for the wicked.”^{vii}

And today, there are Christians all over the world, who are suffering torment. But they do it willingly, knowing that, compared to eternity, it's only for a while. And even if they die for their faith, they are raised to eternal life, they are given the victors crown, and they will never suffer torment ever

again. And we, living in the wealth and comfort and safety, of one of the least persecuted nations on earth, need to know this.

I used to believe that severe persecution in Australia was a **long** way away. I don't believe that any more. I believe it could be just around the corner. We're already beginning to see little glimpses of it:

- with attacks of Islam;
- the negativity towards Christians in the social sphere;
- the way that civil suits are being brought against Christians by special interest groups who are anti-Christian; and
- and by the prosecution of Christians in the law-courts for exercising their Christian convictions and breaking state and federal anti-discrimination laws in the process...

It's coming, and we need to be ready for it.

How do we ready ourselves for persecution? How do we get away from the mindset, "I don't know if I'll remain faithful until I'm put on the spot?"

It begins by making the commitment of faith now – that Jesus is the most important person, in the whole world. And we begin living faithfully for Him now. And just like Polycarp could say, "*86 years I have served Him, and He never once wronged me. How can I blaspheme my King, who saved me?*"

As we live, day by day, experiencing the love and goodness and faithfulness of Jesus Christ to us, we come to that place, "How could I ever deny Him???"

Let' pray,
Lord Jesus Christ, you are forever faithful to us. When troubles and persecutions come, help us to stand firm in the faith you've given us. Never denying You; Always following You; Always trusting You. And Lord, please bring us to this position of faith – even now – for Your sake, and Your glory.
Amen.

ⁱ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polycarp>

ⁱⁱ “*It is crystal clear that Christian 'Passover Seder re-enactments' are a cause of grave disquiet and offence among the Jewish community.*”

The Uniting Church Working Group on Christian Jewish relations.

<http://www.wgcjr.com.au/the-passover-seder.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Beale GK. *The Book of Revelation* NIGTC. (p.240)

^{iv} Beale GK. *The Book of Revelation* NIGTC. (p.240)

^v Durie, Mark, and Bat. *The third choice : Islam, dhimmitude and freedom*. Melbourne: Deror Books, 2009.

^{vi} *The usual meaning throughout secular Greek became a “crown” or “wreath” (Homeric Hymns and Hesiod onwards), especially the victor’s wreath of leaves at the various athletic games.*

in Hemer, C.J., 1986. Crown, Sceptre, Rod L. Coenen, E. Beyreuther, & H. Bietenhard, eds. *New international dictionary of New Testament theology*.

^{vii} <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polycarp>