**Pastor Tim’s Message Notes from 1-10-2021
To the Church in Smyrna…**

(Have volunteers stand up before the sermon and go to the back of the sanctuary for the beginning part of the message)

As you’ve probably noticed, some of our church family is not here today (have 3 volunteers leave the sanctuary before the message). These 3 people have all been arrested for their faith and are awaiting trial. These are difficult times, but God will be with them as He will be with every one of us. And we are together in the Lord, whether we are here today or in prison. Let’s pray. Father, we thank You for Your goodness and Your love and Your help for us. We love You and we trust in You, no matter what. Jesus, You said that for us to follow after You we must be willing to deny ourselves and take up our cross. As your people we declare that we will continue to deny our self-interests and we are willing to take up the cross and physically die for our faith. You died for us, Lord, and we declare that we are willing to die for You. Amen.

Friends, thankfully, this does not describe our present situation here in Dillsburg PA and as Chestnut Grove United Methodist Church. Although with anti-Christian movements presently taking place in our nation, it does not seem out of the question.

(Invite volunteers to be seated again)

One church where this type of situation was very much a reality was the Church in Smyrna during the late first century. My prayer for us today, as we consider their situation, is that we would be inspired by these fellow Christians and our own faith and walk will grow stronger than ever.

But before we go there, just to recap a bit, last Sunday we began to hear Jesus’ messages to 7 churches in the last first century. These churches were located in what was called Asia Minor, which is basically modern-day Turkey. Jesus had established His church over half a century earlier and many churches were in very different situations. And this is just like the world today.

Jesus’ first message was to the Christians in the city of Ephesus. Jesus encouraged that church for their faithfulness to sound teaching, but strongly encouraged them to fall back in love with Him. Jesus cares about both truth and love and we are called to both. For our Triune God is not only the God of truth, but the God of love.

Today, we turn to our second of these seven churches, the church in Smyrna. Interestingly, the only city of these 7 that is still inhabited today is Smyrna. It is now known as Izmir, but it’s the same city. The other cities have all been abandoned for one reason or another, over time.

\*So what was going on in the church and city of Smyrna in the late first century?

In a word, persecution. The church was under very heavy persecution. Smyrna was one of the hot stops where Christians were fiercely opposed.

But why? Why would anyone oppose Christianity? It is the good news from God inviting people to make right with God and forgiven for our sins.

Well, it is opposed for three big reasons. **First, not everyone wants to admit that they are in need of God’s mercy and Jesus’ sacrifice**. Christianity is an offensive message in that sense. This was true not only in Smyrna, but everywhere. This is very evident in our current times as well.

**Second, Smyrna was a city that was extremely local to Rome**. News that Jesus was Lord rather than Caesar, was seen as treasonous everywhere in the Roman Empire. But in some places people made a big deal about it.

Here’s an example. If you’re a Yankee fan, please do not take it personally. But if I wore my Orioles hat in New York City, not everyone would like that, but most people would not try to harm me. But if I wore my Orioles hat at Yankee Stadium in a playoff game, it may be more likely that people would seek to harm me in some way. This has sadly happened at sporting events.

Smyrna would be like Yankee Stadium for Christians to openly confess Jesus as Lord, rather than Caesar.

In fact, in the mid-second century, during another time of persecution in Smyrna, a man by the name of Polycarp burned alive because he refused to confess Caesar as Lord. It is believed that Polycarp was actually a disciple of the Apostle John, one of the 12 and the one who wrote Revelation – this same John.

So the fierce loyalty to Rome in the community made the Christians an easy target.

**And third, Smyrna had a very large Jewish population**. Many of the Jews were largely trained to believe that Christianity was not true and the followers of Christ were a threat to themselves. The Jews received an exemption from the Romans to practice Judaism and many Jews in Smyrna seemed pleased to inform the Romans that the Christians in town believed in Jesus as Lord, rather than Caesar.

Let’s now hear what Jesus has to say to these Christians in Smyrna?

Please turn with me now to **Revelation 2:8-11** and let’s hear Jesus’ words together:

**“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. 9I 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. 10Do 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.**

**11Whoever 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.**

**First, it is important to note that Jesus didn’t have any negative things to say about them**. Their believers didn’t need to be corrected. Their love for Christ was passionate and deep. Their understanding of the Scriptures was sound.

This is something that every church should aspire to. Then Jesus would only have good things to say about it. Let this inspire us to follow their example in staying in love with Jesus and faithfully living according to His Word.

**Second, Jesus reminds them that He knows their troubles.** He knows their sufferings. Jesus says to them “I know your afflictions and your poverty.”

Their afflictions were the persecutions that they were receiving. They were being slandered. People were slandering them. Some were facing imprisonment and possibly even physical death.

And their poverty was likely a result of their afflictions. They were most likely discriminated against because of their loyalty to Jesus. People would have made their life difficult and perhaps not hired them for work. People can make Christians lives very difficult at times.

I have a good friend that is Godfather to one of my daughters, and he bought her a t-shirt for Christmas this year. I have it with me right now. It is a symbol in Aramaic for Nazarene. This was something that ISIS used to mark the homes of Christians in certain places in order to persecute them.

So similar realities to what the Christians in Smyrna were experiencing then is still experienced today. No place is immune to this possibility. Even Dillsburg.

**Third, while Jesus knew their afflictions and poverty, Jesus declares that they are rich.**

Jesus was saying that they were rich towards God. To be rich towards God means to knew and walk with Jesus. This would be the goal of every church. It is like Jesus saying “Well done!”

**Fourth, Jesus tells them that before things get any easier, they are first going to get worse**. Jesus tells them that the devil will put them into prison to test them and they will suffer persecution for 10 days. Ten days was likely not an exact number, but an indicator that it will be severe trials ahead for them, but it will pass.

**And fifth and finally, Jesus simply instructs them to be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor’s crown.**

Be faithful. Keep the faith. Do not deny your belief in Jesus Christ, even when faced with the threat of physical death.

And Jesus promises them that when they live this way, whether or not they are physically put to death, Jesus will reward them with the crown of life.

Jesus Himself is the One who has died and came back to life for them and this same Jesus is worthy of their trust through this difficult time that was coming.

I shared earlier how Smyrna was a city that was very Roman. And the Romans had different games or contests in which the winner received a victor’s crown. So Jesus uses this as a metaphor for his rewarding of his people that stay faithful to them, so matter the circumstances that they face.

So friends, what can we learn from Jesus’ words to the Church in Smyrna?

**One, we all desire to be a Christian community that is rich towards God and whom Jesus does not find any fault with**. To do that we need to stay in love with Jesus and seek to live faithfully to His plans for us, as revealed in Scripture.

**Two, we must remember that Jesus knows our troubles**. Hopefully we will never face the threat of imprisonment for our faith, but it is still not easy to be a Christian in our world today. We may be mocked by some. People may try to get us to keep our Christian faith to ourselves.

Obviously, we have had troubles in a different way in 2020, with covid and unrest in our nation as well. We can be reminded from these words of Jesus, that Jesus is fully aware of the troubles and challenges of each of our lives. He sees us completely and He knows our pains and heartaches and sufferings. ***And I believe that there is a very real comfort that He gives us in simply knowing that He is fully aware of everything.***

**Three, we must remember that while Jesus doesn’t promise to always make things easier for us right away, He does promise that if we keep the faith, we will live with Him forever**.

2020 was a difficult year. 2021 is not off to the easiest start for America. We do not know what challenges we may face this year. But we can trust that, like the Christians in Smyrna, Jesus is telling us to keep the faith and stay strong in Him.

In Acts 14:22 – Paul the Apostle gave support to the churches that he founded that were undergoing persecution. And he tells them, **“We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.”**

As Christians, we must remind ourselves that our faith is not dependent on our circumstances, but on Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, and today and forever. Amen!

So stay in love with Jesus friends. We follow Him, not for our own safety or benefit, but because we love Him and He is worthy of our praises.

**Four, Jesus’ words to the Christians in Smyrna reminds us that we are to stand for the persecution church around the world**. We do this through our prayers and sometimes through giving to ministries that offer help and support to our brothers and sisters. There are places where it is illegal to have a Bible and there are organizations that help to smuggle God’s Word into those places.

**And lastly, we are reminded from the words of Jesus that our enemies are not flesh and blood**. Jesus told them that “the devil would put some of them in prison.”

As Christians, we are to refuse to make other individuals our enemies. Though we may be their enemies, they are not our enemies.

Now, I am not saying that there are never things such as just wars. But I am saying that our real enemies are the devil and his minions. They alone we should hate and show no mercy towards. Jesus did not want the Christians to hate the people that were persecuting them, but to pray for them. That they would become rich towards God. May we do likewise.

[Polycarp | Christian History | Christianity Today](https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/martyrs/polycarp.html)

Revelation Commentary by Grant R. Osborne

Biblegateway.com