

# To Smyrna

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, good morning to you all. It's a real pleasure to be here at Brunnsfield Evangelical Church this Sunday morning and to worship with you. And I'm very grateful for the invitation to preach as we take on the next three verses in the wonderful and sometimes difficult book of Revelation. And we're looking at the second of the seven letters that we're working through, a letter to this young, hard-pressed church in the city of Smyrna, a city that would now fall under the boundaries of modern-day Turkey. So I'd invite you to open a Bible as we look at Revelation chapter 2, verses 8 to 11.

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.

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. Do not be afraid of what you're 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. 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. Let me just invite you to join me as we pray together.

Our gracious Heavenly Father, when we're honest, we have to confess that sometimes we struggle to understand what you're saying. And sometimes we can be slow to place our trust in you.

[ 2 : 26 ] And sometimes even when we understand, we're reluctant to respond. As we gather here this morning, we thank you for your word, trusting in faith that the Bible speaks to us today, and acknowledging that we need your help if we are to hear it and respond rightly to it.

So by your word and your spirit, speak, and help us to love you more, to know you better, and to respond again to the wonderful command and promise of the gospel.

In the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen. Until very recently, until May of this year, I was a student here in Edinburgh.

I was studying theology, and one of my classmates, I'm going to change his name for reasons that might soon become obvious, let's call him Stephen. One of my classmates made the brave and unusual decision to invite me and my wife round for dinner.

Now, I rarely say no to a dinner invite, and at the set time, my wife and I turned up at Stephen's flat. And at this point, I should point out that neither Stephen nor his wife are from Scotland.

[ 3 : 42 ] They are international students who had travelled to Edinburgh to spend time studying here, and they were from China. And as we stood on the doorstep, and as I was talking to my wife, I was already anticipating some cultural differences.

For one, this may surprise you, I don't speak Mandarin. To my consternation, neither did my wife, and I knew that Stephen's wife, at the very least, did not speak English.

And as we walked in the door, we were invited to exchange our shoes for slippers, and I was very quickly given a fresh opportunity to embarrass myself with chopsticks. And it was a really good evening.

We laughed, we talked, and we realized that Stephen, like me, similar age, Christian, training for full-time Christian work, lots in common, loves family, loves food.

And you could see, in a sense, that our lives were on parallel tracks. But then we started talking beyond our studies, what was coming next, and then things suddenly peeled off in very different directions.

[ 4 : 46 ] For me, it seemed quite straightforward. I had to do certain placements. I had to gain certain experience, and then one day hoped to serve in a useful way in a church, hopefully

somewhere that me and my wife were quite content and happy to live.

But for him, the picture was completely different. Stephen would be returning to a church in his home country, a church that wasn't permitted, that was not approved of by the state.

And even as he studied, there was a perennial threat that his visa might be taken away from him, or that he might have his passport removed, or that the mechanisms of citizenship and immigration might be manipulated to separate him from his wife and his young baby daughter.

The church that he'd grown up in, and the church he was likely to serve, often had to meet at strange hours in the day. They had to split into smaller groups and meet at homes. Day and night, he had to publish and circulate Christian books in secret.

Plenty of common round. But a radically different outlook. And I left his flat feeling really full. I had no idea what I'd eaten. But I also felt greatly humbled.

[ 5 : 58 ] Because here was a friend, someone who was following the same Lord, someone who was preaching the same words. And yet, our expectations of what the Christian life was going to look like were pulls apart.

And at first glance, as we think of those three verses that were read aloud, we can see how perhaps the words speak more directly to Stephen's situation than to mine.

Or we might imagine that they say more to the church in, say, Pakistan or Syria, or perhaps in Turkey, than it does in Bruntsfield. But by the grace of God, these words from Jesus to this suffering church in Smyrna do have something to say to us.

And it says something loud and clear to each one of us who follows Jesus and calls him Lord. Now, before we get into that, I'm conscious that lots of people have been coming and going from holidays.

There might be visitors here, and this is there being thrown straight into this series. So let me set the scene as we find it in the book of Revelation. This is the second, as I've said, of seven letters.

[ 7 : 09 ] And these letters are being written down, recorded by John. And John is looking from this rocky little island of Patmos to the mainland.

And in a great vision, he sees the church in all its diversity and yet its unity in Christ. in the whole sweep of history. And he looks out on this great vision and he is confronted by a vision, a vision we read of in chapter one of seven lampstands.

And it's explained that these seven lampstands are seven churches. And there amid the lampstands, we find Jesus. And just as Jesus promised his disciples in that great verse in the Great Commission, surely I will be with you always to the very end of the age.

Jesus is there. He is present among the churches, walking among the lampstands. And he is tending to them. He is speaking to them.

He is warning them, encouraging them, teaching them. He has rebukes for them, harsh words. And when we look around the church as we find it in Edinburgh and in Scotland, which is so often declining, so often discouraged, so often irrelevant, we need very little persuasion that we need to take seriously what Jesus has to say as he walks among the churches.

[ 8 : 35 ] And Jesus knows the churches intimately. If we imagine a tennis coach watching Andy Murray, he's not just interested in the scoreline, he's watching the angle of his elbow. He's watching the way he moves his feet, every last serve, volley, chip, serve, just to make these minute adjustments.

And Jesus knows these churches as he walks among them. He knows every facet of their lives. He knows their faith, their doubts, their joys, their pain, every small detail of their circumstance, the opportunities they face, and also the opposition.

And Christ speaks to these churches that he knows so well with penetrating insights. There are no platitudes here. We see in practice what the writer to the Hebrews describes in that famous verse in chapter four.

The word of God is living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword, penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow.

It judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. And so Christ speaks pointedly with purpose and power to the seven churches, and he speaks to us today.

[ 9 : 52 ] Last week, we looked at the church in Ephesus, and we found a church that had so much going for it, so many plus points, praiseworthy deeds, hard work, sweat, perseverance, sound teaching, but in the final analysis, for all its activity and endeavor, it had forgotten its first love.

And if that letter emphasized that love is a key mark of the Christian church, the letter to Smyrna focuses on something else, a second key mark, suffering.

And this leap from love to suffering might jar us at first, but when we think about it, we can see how the two are immediately intertwined. We think of a parent's sacrificial love for their child.

We think of the patriot who will, at great cost, fight for their country. Or the sports fan, especially the Scotland sports fan, who knows nothing but hurt and disappointment in their love and pride for their country.

Or again, the married couple who, with great forbearance and love and care, think back to their wedding vows for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, unto death us do part.

[ 11 : 12 ] And they mean it. And they mean it when the money runs out. And they mean it when one of them falls desperately ill. And despite what our popular culture might suggest, you're actually more likely to find real love by a hospital bed or at a graveside than you are in a fancy restaurant at a candlelit table for two.

Real love is not cheap. It's costly. And it's prepared to suffer. And we see this kind of suffering love right through the history of the church.

There is the Christian's love for their saviour, a commitment that is confessed and lived out even under the threat of radical and brutal persecution.

We prayed for some of these situations just a few moments ago. Situations we find today in our world. And here in Smyrna, in the letter we're looking at, we find a church who is under extreme pressure, beset with difficulties opposition and bleak, draining, exhausting poverty.

And while the church was struggling, it found itself surrounded by a city that was thriving, bustling with commercial activity, great, impressive architecture, culture, prosperity, learning, and a great religious centre for pagan worship and for worshipping the name of the emperor.

[ 12 : 44 ] and we have the church moving in a totally different direction from the society. One is affluent and upwardly mobile. The other is small and squashed.

And Christ is perfectly clear. He doesn't try and brush it under the carpet. He says in verse 9, I know your afflictions and your poverty.

they're being squeezed from all sides and it hurts. It really hurts and there are no hidden reserves, there are no obvious moment of respite, there is no material security for them, there is no cheap get out of jail card free.

But then the picture is fleshed out a little in the second half of verse 9 we read of one strand of the opposition, one source of these difficulties.

The Jews, a group who had sought it seems to discredit and disparage the Christians. And we read a phrase that may seem quite troublesome to us.

[ 13 : 46 ] I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Now this is strong language, perhaps an offence to our modern sensibilities.

One suspects it would be immediately censored in our age of political correctness. But it is careful that we are honest about what's being said here and we tease out exactly what is meant.

We need to consider the background. Now the very first Christians were of course very Jewish.

Jesus was a Jew, Paul was a Jew, Peter was a Jew, and they clung to the Jewish hope.

They studied the ancient Jewish scriptures, our Old Testament. They worshipped Jesus Christ, seeing him as the fulfillment of the promises that had been offered.

Many were Jewish converts. Yet nonetheless we see in many occasions, we see this right through the book of Acts, the early church, the first Christians found themselves coming into a clash with the established Jewish authorities and communities.

[ 14 : 55 ] And in a church like Smyrna, the fledgling church would contain a mix of Jews and non-Jews. And then of course there'd be the Jewish community itself, well established, flourishing, considerable in size, quite influential in the city.

but they did not share the belief that Jesus was Lord. And they did not share the belief that Jesus was Messiah. And some of the Jews rejected this belief and they slandered those who would follow Jesus and call him and worship him as Lord.

And so cracks began to appear in a community that once seemed to be more blended together.

And the Christians, they didn't see their faith, as I've said, they didn't see it as something new, as some novelty invented out of nowhere.

But quite simply it was impossible within the Jewish Christian community to affirm on one hand that Jesus is Lord and on the other that he isn't.

Therefore the question became who is a true Jew? Who is true to all these promises that were given in the scriptures in the Old Testament? Was it those who are worshipping Jesus?

[16:08] Or is it those who reject him as a dangerous novelty? It's a difficult question. One answer is given in a way by Paul in Romans chapter 2 and where he says that a Jew, the one who is a Jew, is that one who has the spirit at work in their heart, not merely someone who's got the external image and appearance of a Jew where it's on the outside.

It's about the heart. And with this perspective we can understand Christ's verdict in this letter in these harsh words that the Jews in Smyrna have become a synagogue of Satan.

It's not a vague slur. It's not a racial hate crime. It's not mudslinging. The Satan, literally, the accuser. And this community have been launching accusations against the Christians, slandering them and distancing them from the synagogue.

Now, for us, in our own small ways, we perhaps know that experience of being excluded, of being pushed out of a group. To think with regret and sorrow, I actually used to fit in here, but now I'm not welcome.

To be ostracized, no longer part of the club, the team, and in some sad situations, no longer part of the family. To have your bridges utterly burnt. But for the church in Smyrna, there were immediate practical and particular consequences because the Jews were in an unusual position in that they had established certain privileges.

[17:50] They weren't expected to participate in the same way with all that was going on in the rest of the city, this worship that was focused on a man, focused on the emperor.

And whereas initially, from the point of view of everyone else, the Christians were indistinguishable from the Jews and therefore had the same privileges, suddenly those privileges were stripped away.

And the expectation came to the Christian, you should be participating like everyone else. Why can't you? And it was clear that the Christians were caught between a rock and a hard place, ostracized from the Jews who had thrown them out and ostracized from the society that wanted them to worship a man God.

And so, in the midst of a city that is booming, that is prosperous, that is on the up, we have this dismal picture of a church that is poor and persecuted, suffering because they would not betray the Lord they love.

So we have this rich and full picture of Smyrna, Smyrna, the suffering church, and for many Christians through history and around the world today, Smyrna's story is their story and it's a difficult story and in some measure it may be or have been or perhaps will be in the future our experience as well.

[19:17] By the grace of God, I know in my experience I've been spared any threat of physical violence for my faith. but perhaps you have or you know the bitter taste of an unjust insult or you've endured that snub or exclusion being overlooked or you find yourself or your church or the Bible ridiculed, overlooked, caricatured, presented in a straw man argument or perhaps you've been the young student who goes to join the university rugby team and they're told they can only take part if they take part in some ritual that would utterly shame the name of Jesus and probably play havoc with their digestive system.

But that's beside the point. Or the individual who stands and they're trying to have a serious conversation and they're told plainly to their faith that they've committed intellectual suicide, that their faith is a crutch, that they're intolerant or arrogant or manipulative or bigoted or simply naive. The slander comes and difficulties follow. And it is inevitable because the church, the church is in the world.

It is rooted in the unfolding of history and in culture and all that's going on. But it is committed to the lordship of Jesus Christ. It has a firm allegiance.

And to the world, this allegiance which is outside the world is a disturbing fact. And the church is therefore a problematic presence.

[21:01] And the world around us may perhaps only raise an eyebrow in derision at the Christian who calls Jesus their friend or their savior. But when the church takes a stand and says, Jesus is not just my friend.

Jesus is lord and Jesus is king. And when the church proclaims that there is an authority in Jesus Christ that does not follow under the authority of me, myself, and I and my own preferences. That proclaims an authority that does not fall under the majority rule. That proclaims an authority that doesn't get swept aside by someone because they're wealthy or healthy or educated. An authority that does not fall under the all-consuming power of human reason as it often appears today. When the church proclaims that kind of authority, when it calls Jesus lord and king, it will be met not with a raised eyebrow but with a clenched fist. this is Smyrna's situation. This may be our situation. And we need to listen carefully to what Christ says to this suffering church.

[ 22 : 18 ] To begin with, he does not waste words explaining the suffering. Nor does he promise a quick removal of the suffering.

Though he does hint that they may well be, in fact they will be, delivered through it, he says, do not be afraid. But even as he invites them to have courage and not to fear what is happening, he offers another warning.

There is more suffering to come. In verse 10, we see what they are to expect. Prison. You may lose your freedom.

Persecution. You may lose your security and peace. Death. You may even lose your life.

What then are we to make of this marginalized and downtrodden church? How are they in their own minds, in their own faith, supposed to match up a God of love and grace with their present afflictions?

[ 23 : 28 ] I wonder if you've spent time reading through the Psalms. I wonder if you've read Psalm 73. It's a kind of wrestling psalm where the psalmist is taking hold of God and saying, what's going on here?

You might want to turn to it now, Psalm 73. I'm just going to pick out a few phrases. It starts like this. Surely, God is good to Israel. Surely, there is an expectation. And yet, as the psalm unfolds, it is clear that this confession, this belief, is held despite circumstances, despite disappointment. Verses 2-4. As for me, my feet had almost slipped. I had nearly lost my foothold. I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

Upwardly mobile Smyrna. They have no struggles. Their bodies are healthy and strong. And we see this perspective in the suffering church in an affluent world.

[ 24 : 43 ] There is the church feeling like the ground is being ripped from under them. And then there are others who seem so prosperous and happy. And then in verse 13, this grim question.

Surely, in vain, I've kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence. And perhaps this is the question for Smyrna.

Is there poverty in vain? Is there faithfulness in the midst of suffering and afflictions? Is this all for nothing? You need to listen to what Christ is saying to the church.

And the answer is surely no and no again. Because where the world sees and where we with worldly eyes see poverty and lack and disappointment, Christ sees great riches.

For what Christ is measuring is not temporal prosperity or influence or position which is here today and gone tomorrow, the rise and fall and the rich and famous.

[ 25 : 49 ] He is looking at spiritual riches that do not perish, that will not spoil or fade away. And so we have a paradox that is at the heart of the Christian church wherever it is found that the true riches of the church are found in poverty.

This is something Christ taught. We could read the Beatitudes in Luke 6. Blessed are the poor, the hungry, the mourning, the weeping and the excluded.

And Jesus, of course, lived it and died it. Paul puts it in his second letter to the Corinthians in chapter 8, verse 9. As he seeks to encourage a church, he points to the grace of Christ who, though he was rich, yet for your sakes became poor so that through his poverty might become rich.

And so Christ says to the church, I know you. I know your poverty and your struggles. I know them because I've lived them and I died them and I tell you that you are rich in God's economy.

And he says to them to be faithful, to not be afraid, even in the midst of their suffering. Yes, the world sees something that is broken and brittle and fragile, and Christ is not going to promise a consolation prize, but rather he fortifies them for this struggle, the struggle that will continue for some time and he promises them the most wonderful prize.

[ 27 : 33 ] Drawing on the image of this city that had a great stadium in the center and had a great taste for pageantry and occasion, he promises them something like an Olympic medal except it's a wreath.

It's bestowed on the head of a champion. Christ calls it a crown and it's a crown that is not for the athlete or the scholar or the powerful ruler, but it is a crown for the powerless, the penniless, irrelevant church, the church that will remain faithful, clinging on, even unto death.

It's a great prize and it's a wonderful promise that in faithful suffering comes great blessing and this is the promise of the one who walks among the lampstands, the one who is first and who is last, who outlives and outstretches every empire and overrules every emperor, one who endured the quiet abandonment and anxiety of Gethsemane and the public horror of Golgotha, who knows spiritual emptiness, abandonment, injustice, mockery, violence and death, one who introduces himself as one who died and rose again.

This is the one who promises the crown, who holds out the prize. This is the one who is sovereign even in the midst of persecution.

And yes, persecution is coming from this church. It speaks of 10 days, not 240 hours, but a finite time. A finite time known by one who is first and last, who knows all our ends from the very beginning, our Lord and our Savior.

[ 29 : 27 ] Let me finish with a story, a story from history, a story from Smyrna, the story of Polycarp, who was one of the great early Christian leaders. He met John, who wrote Revelation, in his childhood, and he died on the 23rd of February, 155 AD.

And this is his story. Polycarp refused to take part in a simple ritual. There was nothing especially drizzly about it. Just sprinkle some powder, some incense and confess that Caesar is Lord.

A small compromise. It wouldn't directly affect the health and happiness of anyone he knew or cared about. But he refused. And he was arrested and brought into the stadium where before the crowds and before the government official, he was appealed to to spare himself the death penalty. And he refused. They said, swear and I'll set you free. Curse Christ. That was the invitation. And this old man replied, 80 and 6 years I have served him and he never did me any injury.

How then can I blaspheme my King and Savior? And that same day this old man of faith was martyred. And his faith was in this great King the one who is first and is last who died and came to life again who says to his disciples on the cusp of his great hour of suffering in this world you will have trouble but take heart I have overcome the world.

[ 31 : 10 ] we live in a scary and broken world. This morning the Home Secretary announced new funding to protect places of worship and the Church of Christ in our world is a suffering church but we're to take heart.

He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Let us pray. Lord our God our King and Savior we live our lives here in this city and in other places and it is our privilege to know and worship you.

And as we study your word this morning we find it widens our vision and it reminds us that at the heart of our faith is a suffering king and that your church is a suffering church.

Lord in our own sufferings help us to be encouraged to be faithful to hold on to the promises you hold out for us and in our times of peace and prosperity help us to pray and to remember and to honour those who the cost of following you is not merely inconvenience but that costs them their very last breath and penny.

May they know your comfort may they hear your voice we pray. Amen.