

We are now leaving Ephesus, heading north about forty miles to the city of Smyrna, because the second letter of Revelation was written to the church in that city. And the church in Smyrna was also dealing with a lot of issues, but not the same as those that we saw in Ephesus. Because while Ephesus had troubles inside the church, Smyrna had troubles outside the church. They were under a very severe attack on multiple sides. And as a result, they were sorely tempted to give up their faith in Christ entirely, especially because they were under the threat of death simply for being a Christian.

To understand this, Christians, we have to see that the main danger for the church in Smyrna came from the people of the city itself. The people of Smyrna were very proud of their long relationship with the Roman Empire. Because three hundred years earlier, they had turned to Rome for help in wars against their neighbors, and Rome had helped them at that time. And this early military alliance continued through all of those centuries, and it continued to grow. And to build that relationship even more, the people of Smyrna built temples to the Roman gods. They adopted Roman ways. They even upheld the emperor and the empire in every way that they could, building great monuments in their honor. So the people of Smyrna, then, were fiercely loyal to the Roman Empire. In our terms, we might say that they were a very patriotic city. And they were concerned to keep that relationship going. And as a result, they were hostile towards anything that might threaten it. Any person, any organization, any religion that threatened that relationship with Rome was a threat to the life of the city.

The reason for that, Christians, was because of their religion, the sacrifices which they offered. I know that we tend to separate politics and religion in our day. We think of them as two completely separate things that maybe have something to do with each other every now and then, but they're really two different parts of our lives. But in those days, Christians, politics and religion were one and the same. People offered up sacrifices to the gods not just because they were pious, because it was the right thing in their eyes to do, but also because it guaranteed peace and security and law and order for the society as a whole. If we want to understand it, I think the best way to do it is to think of it in terms of a business contract. People, on the one hand, offered up the sacrifices to the gods to show their loyalty, to show their respect, and the gods in return were supposed to give them things like peace or stability or security or victory in war, whatever it may be. And it was this mutual relationship between people and the gods, in the Romans' eyes, that kept the whole society going. What you thought about it, what you believed, even what you felt didn't matter. That wasn't important. The important part was what you did. You had to keep the gods happy through these regular sacrifices so that the whole society would benefit as a result.

This is the reason why Roman religion was in every part of their life, even in parts of their life that we might find a little surprising. Imagine going down to the marketplace or going to the grocery store today and finding out that the meat that you wanted to buy had been sacrificed to Jupiter. Or imagine going to the theater or like the movie theater, and before the show started, you had to participate in a sacrifice to Bacchus. That was what their society was like. Sacrifice was in every single part. It was crucial to everything that they did, so that everything would run smoothly. In fact, the Romans thought that if anything went wrong, if something bad happened, it was because somebody forgot to offer a sacrifice, or because somebody messed one up and now they need to fix it. So if they wanted to avert disaster, if they didn't want to bring some catastrophe down upon their heads, they needed to do whatever needed to be done to correct it,

either by offering the right sacrifice or getting rid of the problem. Because if there was no problem, then there would be no threat.

So all of this shows, then, why they thought of Christians as a threat to law and order, to the stability of their society. Because Christians could not offer the sacrifices. They didn't want to. They couldn't. Jesus is the only sacrifice that needed to be made. But in the Romans' eyes, no sacrifices meant that the gods would be angry. And the gods being angry meant that disaster was surely going to fall upon them. And so they pressured the Christians to go along with this, to offer those sacrifices. Do you want a disaster to happen? Do you want catastrophe to come down upon our city? Do you want us to be conquered? Then offer the sacrifices so that our society can continue. And if they still refused, they put them to death. No troublemakers, no problems.

But that wasn't the only threat that the Christians faced in Smyrna. The other main threat came from the Jews who also lived in the city. Now, we might think that the Jews faced the same problem as the Christians. They didn't want to offer sacrifices to the gods, so maybe they would be seen as something bad too. But that wasn't the case. The Jews were permitted to practice their religion in the Roman Empire. The Romans felt that they could tolerate them because the Jews still offered up a sacrifice. Yes, it wasn't to the Roman gods, but it could be done on behalf of the empire and the emperor, and for that reason they could be tolerated. For that reason the Jews had a legal religion within the Roman Empire. So they were allowed to do it as long as they didn't cause problems. I think it's better to think of it not so much as a right to practice their religion as a privilege to do it. And privileges can also be taken away if there were problems.

And so the Christians in Smyrna might be tempted to use that privilege for themselves. If it's legal to be a Jew, then why not go back to the synagogues? If it's legal to be a Jew, why not just say that you are one? You could hide from the authorities among them. But the Jews knew perfectly well that if they were connected to the Christians, they would lose that privilege. They might as well kiss that privilege goodbye. And so the Jews were very eager to sharply distinguish themselves from the Christian church, seeking out any who were trying to hide among them and turning them over to the authorities. Or even hunting them out through the city and exposing them so that they would be thrown into prison. And being thrown into prison meant that you were simply waiting to be put to death.

This is why Jesus calls the Jews the "synagogue of Satan" In verse 9 of our reading, because the Jews were working together with the people of Smyrna and with the Romans to persecute the true church of God. And the worst part about it was they thought that they were serving God at the same time, that they were doing the right thing by handing these Christians over. This is why Jesus says in John chapter 16: "They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God."

So the Christians in Smyrna were in a very difficult position. On the one hand, they were facing capital punishment simply because they were Christians. And on the other hand, they were facing Jews who were eager to expose them and hand them over to death. What are you supposed to do in that situation?

And the great temptation that they faced, Christians, was to deny the faith entirely, to turn away from Christ so that they would no longer be under the threat of death. Either by offering those

sacrifices to the false gods or by going back to the synagogue and becoming one with the Jews. Because the only other option that they had was to stand firm, and standing firm meant that they were going to lose everything.

Now, of course, in our day, Christians, we don't face such a stark dilemma. We are not risking death simply for being a Christian. Our lives are not in danger. But that doesn't mean that the temptations that the people in Smyrna felt are not still there for us. Because behind all of this is a question that the church in Smyrna faced and a question that we also must face, and that question is: what matters the most to you? To put it a little bit differently: which means more, Jesus or something else? If following Jesus means losing a friend, are you willing to lose them? If following Jesus means losing your job, are you willing to let it go? If following Jesus means suffering physical pain, are you willing to endure it? If following Jesus means losing your very life, are you willing to give it up? How much does Jesus mean to you? What price are you willing to pay for him? Because giving in, turning away from him probably will mean that things will be a lot easier for you. It's always easier to go along with something than it is to resist. But if we give in, Christians, listen to what Jesus says, Luke chapter 9: "What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels."

But for those who do hold on, for those who stand firm, Jesus brings a word of comfort. Jesus says in verse 8 of our reading: "The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life." Jesus is the First and the Last, the one who controls all things. And that is a great comfort to Christians who are facing those stark dilemmas. Our situation is in God's hand. God will lead us through every dark valley. He knows what we are going through. He is the one who will care for us through it all. And even if we must die for the sake of Christ, Christians, even if we must lose everything, God brings us through it all to himself in heaven. Because Jesus himself suffered and lost everything in this world, but he rose again. And if death could not conquer him, then nothing will ever separate us from him, not even our own death. If he lives, how can we ever be separated from God who cares for us through it all?

Jesus says in verse 9: "I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich)." A suffering Christian always seem so poor to the world. It seems like they've lost everything, like they have nothing whatsoever. But in reality, Christians, a Christian is richer than any king, because we have Jesus Christ. Even if we lose everything in this life, even if it is all taken away, we have lost nothing, because Christ is ours, and we have life through him.

And Jesus says in verse 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." And those ten days are also a comfort, Christians. I know that ten days may seem like a lot, just like losing anything for Jesus seems like a lot. But what are ten days in comparison with eternity? What is a week and a half of suffering compared to endless joy with Jesus? It's like the hymn Amazing Grace says: "When we've been there ten thousand years, / Bright shining as the sun, / We've no less days to sing God's praise / Than when we'd first begun." What is ten days compared to ten thousand years, compared to a hundred thousand years, compared to eternity with Christ? Jesus promises us that our time of suffering will be short, no matter how intense it

may seem right now. Because even if we die, Christians, we will be with Christ. What can be greater than that?

Therefore, as Jesus says, "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life." Do not give in, Christians. Hold on to Jesus. Hold on to what truly matters, and he will give you the crown of life. This crown is a wreath which was given to victorious athletes, to athletes who won a race. It's like a gold medal in our terms. But the gold medals of this world will crumble into nothing, but the crown of life that Jesus gives to those who conquer, to those who have overcome, will go on forever. It's like James says: "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him." So hold on. Do not let go. Jesus is worth every cost! He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, the First and the Last and the Living One, strengthen us through every trial to hold on to you, no matter what the cost may be in this life, so that we may finally see you face to face and receive the crown of everlasting life; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.