

Martyrs for Jesus

Revelation 2:8-11

Introduction:1) There is a very famous statement, well known from the early history of the church: “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” It was made by the Church Father Tertullian in A.D. 197 (c. 160-c. 225) in a defense of Christianity to the Roman Empire. The actual quote found in his *Apolegeticus* [Apology] reads, “The oftener we are mow[ed] down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.” (ch. 50). There is much truth in this statement.

2) Suffering, persecution and martyrdom has indeed been the calling of the Church of the Lord Jesus somewhere among the nations throughout her entire history. At one time the book *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs* was a perennial best seller cataloguing the stories of men and women who gave their life for Christ. Today, *Voice of the Martyrs* updates us on the persecution and sufferings of our brothers and sisters around the world. *Open Doors* does the same. *Time Magazine* reported the number of Christian martyrs doubled between 2012 and 2013 (Jan. 8, 2014). Nigeria led the way in 2012. Syria in 2013. Iraq, Rwanda, and Sudan are not far behind. It is estimated that 100-150 million Christians are martyred every year in recent decades. Some estimate that 65% of all those martyred took place since the dawn of the 20th century (*EWTN News*, 5-10-02). This does not take into account

those imprisoned, tortured, and persecuted by other means. Yes, suffering, persecution and even martyrdom has often followed in the wake left by the crucified Nazarene as He and His gospel have walked the pages of human history. For some this it is the normal, their normal, Christian life.

3) We see this in the life of a first century church located in a city called Smyrna, a church with whom Christ was well pleased (2:8-11). From the outside it did not look like much. He had neither the prestige of Ephesus or the wealth and prosperity of Laodicea. However, what it did have was a love and passion for Christ that caught the eye of the One whose “eyes are like a fiery flame.” (1:14). Like Philadelphia, our Lord has no word of criticism or correction. This is a church we can learn from. This is a church whose example many will need to draw strength from in the days ahead as you take up your cross and follow Jesus. John Piper says this is a letter where, “Things are worse than and better than they seem” (His Sermon title, 6-6-93). I think that gets it about right.

I. Christ is characterized by His deity and resurrection power 2:8

- John is charged to write to the angel, the divine messenger, who watches over the church of Smyrna.
- Smyrna is modern Izmir and the only one of the 7 cities of Revelation 2-3 still in existence. It is 35 miles north of Ephesus. A proud and beautiful city, its coins were inscribed with the words “First of Asia in beauty and

size.” (Mounce, 73). Ephesus and Pergamum challenged this! Temples of Apollos, Asclepius, Aphrodite, Cybele and Zeus dotted the landscape of this beautiful pagan city. Politically the city was close with Rome and the imperial cult (emperor worship). The Roman orator Cicero paid Smyrna a great compliment calling her “the city of our most faithful and most ancient allies.” As a reward for her loyalty in A.D. 23, Smyrna beat out 11 other cities and received permission to build the first temple to honor Tiberius Caesar (A.D. 14-37), the Caesar who reigned when Christ was crucified. (Johnson, BSC, 44). Couple this allegiance to Rome with a large and influential Jewish population, and you had all the ingredients for a hostile environment for the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ. While we do not know for certain how the church began, it is reasonable to suppose that it came about from Paul’s ministry in Ephesus. Acts 19:10 tells us, “all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks.”

- This was a church that especially needed encouragement. It was persecuted and suffering. And, things were going to get worse. John takes them back to the vision of the glorified Christ in 1:9-20, specifically to verses 17-18. Here are the words they need to hear and the Christ they need to see.

1) He is the eternal God

Jesus is described as the First and the Last, the *protos* and *eschatos*. This is a title used of God in Isaiah 44:6 and 48:12. The characteristics of deity are appropriately ascribed to Christ. The emphasis is on his eternity and sovereignty. He is the eternal Lord over all of history and He will have the last word! He has always been aware of the circumstances of His people. He knows their situation right now. He has their future in plain sight. Time is in His hands. This is a God you can trust today and tomorrow. The city Smyrna may claim to be the “first in Asia,” but it is Christ who is the “First and Last” and He alone provides “a superior foundation for security” (David Graves, “Local References in the Letter to Smyrna (Rv. 2:8-11), Part 2: Historical Background, *Bible and Spade* 19.1 (2006, 25).

2) He is the resurrected Lord

- If “The First and the Last” draws attention to His deity, “the One who was dead and came to life” speaks to His humanity. The former emphasized His authority over time. The later emphasizes His authority over death and life. Jesus experienced death for us, and a far more horrible death than any human will ever know. He bore the full judgment and wrath of God for the sins of the world (John 1:29). He was subject to slander, persecution, rejection, imprisonment and

death. He walked this road. But, “He came to life!” He conquered! He won! Like their Savior, they too may walk the road of persecution and suffering. Like Him, they may even walk the road of an unjust death. Don’t lose heart. To live is Christ and to die is gain (Phil. 1:21). In Christ you are in a win/win scenario. He lives and you will live with Him too with no fear of the death all should fear, “the second death” (v. 11).

- A word to our international missionaries: going to serve King Jesus in the hard places has a certain romance to it, and it does. But, it is a call to go and die if it is His will. It will be worth it, and He will sustain you, but it may cost you. One of the most powerful examples of this, in my lifetime, occurred in 1999. Here is how *Christianity Today* described it: “Every year for 20 years missionary Graham Staines of Australia conducted five-day open-air “jungle camps” in villages of the eastern Indian state of Orissa. After a meeting on January 23, 1999, the 58-year-old Staines and his two sons, 10-year-old Philip and 7-year-old Timothy, were sleeping in a vehicle parked outside a local church when militant Hindus doused the vehicle with gasoline and set it afire. “My husband and sons tried to get out of the burning vehicle, but were stopped by the attackers,” Staines wife, Gladys recounts. As

the flames engulfed the vehicle, the mob danced and some shouted, “Justice has been done; the Christians have been cremated in Hindu fashion.” The mob kept would-be rescuers at bay for more than an hour until making sure the missionary and his sons had died. Staines, secretary of the Evangelical Missionary Society, an independent missionary organization based in Brisbane, had been operating a hospital and clinic for lepers for 34 years. Two days after the murders, lepers dug the graves for the family while Gladys Staines consoled them as they wept. “God has given me peace, and I have never questioned his wisdom in allowing this tragedy,” Gladys Staines said after the tragedy. “These people are my people and I hope to stay here.” (*Christianity Today*, 3-1-99). Gladys and her 13-year-old daughter Esther, did stay. *World Magazine* reported that Gladys said, “I am terribly upset but not angry. My husband loved Jesus Christ who has taught us to forgive our enemies” (11-6-99; p. 16). It is a living resurrected Lord who gives us the ability to do this.

By the way, in 2005 she received from the government of India one of its highest civilian awards. Amazingly, there was negative protest throughout the nation. Gladys, as of 2014, still serves Christ and still forgives those who murdered her husband and sons.

II. The Church is commended for its faith and perseverance 2:9-10

The word Smyrna means “myrrh,” which was a sweet perfume used to embalm dead bodies. As a gift from the Magi, (Matt. 2:11), it was prophetic of the suffering and death Jesus would experience. This city had a history of suffering (Graves, 26). Now that lot was cast upon the church. By all outward signs she was weak and poor. BUT REMEMBER: looks can be deceiving. Upon careful inspection by the Lord, we find a strong and wealthy people, at least as Jesus sees things.

1) We must accept sacrifice 2:14

Jesus tells His people at Smyrna, “I know you affliction and poverty...”

Swindoll puts this statement in a wonderfully descriptive context: “Imagine yourself sitting among the gathering of God’s people in Smyrna on a cold morning before sunrise. A small, lamp-lit room houses the remnant of beaten and beleaguered church members. The once-lively crowd of Christians now displays obvious gaps where men and women once sat. Some have fallen away under the persecution. Others are simply gone – arrested, exiled, or executed. Some of you risked your lives just to meet this morning to pray, to sing hymns to God, and to read from Holy Scripture. All of you are outcasts, desperate for a word of encouragement from the messenger sitting in our midst. In the dim light the pastor unrolls a scroll and begins to read with a

calm, quiet confidence. Whispering and shuffling in the room ceases when you hear from whom the message comes – the risen Lord Himself. The entire group seems to hold its breath when Christ begins His commendation: “I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich): (2:9).”

(Swindoll, 45).

Christ has first hand intimate knowledge of their plight. “Affliction” could also be rendered “tribulation” (*ESV*). He knows the burdens that weigh heavy on you and the daily pressures that affect you. I know your “poverty.” This church was enduring economic, physical, religious and social opposition. They were marked out and ostracized. They experienced economic boycott and were misrepresented. And, they paid a price. It cost them to take their stand for Jesus. However, Christ saw them not as poor, but “rich!” Materially they may have little but spiritually they had everything. People on earth mocked them as paupers, but God praised them as wealthy. James 2:5 is helpful here, “Listen, my dear brothers: didn’t God choose the poor in this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that He has promised to those who love Him?” There are sacrifices in following Jesus, but it is worth it all.

2) We will be attacked by Satan

2:9

This church at Smyrna was particularly attacked by the Jewish population in the city. They were “slandered” (Gr. *blasphemia*) by what John vividly describes as “a synagogue of Satan.” (cf. Rom. 2:28-29). This phrase needs to be carefully explained. First, these were descendants of Abraham by physical birth but not spiritual birth. In John 8:44 we find words quite similar as Jesus said of those unbelieving Jews, “You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do.” Physical heritage is no indication of spiritual standing! Hostile and bent on persecuting the followers of Christ, these Jews were tools of the evil one. They were under His influence. Ultimately, Satan was the real enemy. Satan is Hebrew and means “adversary.” Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 provide some insight, by way of typology of his fall. (He is mentioned in Rev. 2:9-10, 13; 3:9; 9:11; 12:9-10, 12; 13:4; 20:2, 7, 10).

Second, neither this text nor any other text in the Bible gives warrant for any thought or act of anti-Semitism. None! In commenting on the reality of anti-Semitism and a Christian perspective John Piper is extremely helpful at this point: “[Anti-Semitism] has seemed amazing to me because Jesus was a Jew, and all the 12 apostles were Jews, and the whole of our Bible was written by Jews (except for [possibly] Luke), and Jesus said, “Salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22), and to be Christian is to be grafted into the covenant made

with Abraham the first Jew (Romans 11:17-24), and to become a Christian is to become “Jewish” – a child of Abraham by faith (Galatians 3:7).

And on top of all that, the day is coming when the nation of Israel will be brought back to her Messiah and be saved and become one with the Christian Church in the covenant of grace established with Abraham (Romans 11:25-26)...So how could so much anti-Semitism (hatred and persecution and ridicule) rise up in the Christian church? Part of the answer is found in texts like this one. It shows that the animosity from the Jewish community toward the Christian church in the first two or three centuries was immense. And it started to go both ways.

I only mention this as a partial explanation not as a justification. Hatred and persecution and ridicule toward Jews as a people is never justified. Our main disposition should be Paul’s: “My heart’s desire and prayer to God is that they might be saved.” And so I exhort you: Don’t joke about Jewishness. Don’t use cavalier stereotypes. Don’t hate. Don’t ridicule. If you pray for Jewish people the way Paul and Stephen and Jesus did – with a heart of longing for their salvation and love for them as the estranged people of God – you will find it very difficult to make jokes or speak disparagingly.” (“Things Are Worse Than...”)

- Verse 10 flows logically and naturally from verse 9. There is a command to trust and a promise of suffering. “Don’t be afraid” (pre. imp. with a neg.) Stop fearing “what you are about to suffer.” They anticipated it and Jesus promises it. “Look,” behold, “the Devil” (Gr. *diabolos*, “the accuser”), the one active behind his human puppets, “will throw some of you into prison to test you.” He will try and harm you but I will use his evil intentions to refine and prove you. I will reveal you faith, loyalty and love for me. You will have affliction (“tribulation,” *ESV*) for 10 days” (symbolic of a definite but limited period of time). I will allow it and I will control its duration. A word about the future of the Church specifically in America.
- Be prepared for the jarring truth that just as in Rev. 2:9 and Smyrna in the 1st century, those who oppose and reject Christianity are going to oppose and persecute us. Not only will they say we are wrong, they will say we are bigoted, dangerous and evil. We will be slandered as anti-choice, anti-diversity, anti-gay, anti-inclusive, anti-tolerant. We can anticipate economic boycotts, governmental restrictions, and social ostracism. Eventually more severe persecution and even imprisonment will likely be our experience. Of course this is already true for followers of Christ around the world, and it is coming to America. Christians, welcome to

the 1st century. Our response? What we see here: don't be afraid, expect it. Don't run from it, but receive it from the hands of a sovereign God who is testing, pruning and refining your faith. Remember James again, "Consider it a great joy, my brothers, whenever you experience various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance." (James 1:2-3).

III. The church is challenged by God's reward and promise 2:10-11

- This church now received a much needed word of encouragement. It is a two-fold promise it can count on because it comes from Jesus. Our Lord does not say tribulation is coming so "suck it up." Hard times are coming so "deal with it." No, men may kill the body but they cannot destroy the soul! (Matt. 10:28). Men may murder our bodies and that means one thing for the Christian: instant heaven! What do we have to fear?!

1) We will receive a crown for our faith 2:10

- "Be faithful unto death" my brother and sister. Our King Jesus "will give you the crown of life." The word for "crown" is *stephanos* meaning a victors crown. James 1:12 reminds us, "A man who endures trials is blessed, because when he passes the test he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love Him." This

crown of life is the crown of life itself, eternal life. It is the reward for all whose faith in in the crucified and risen Christ.

- Crowns are mentioned a number of times in the Bible and it is instructive to note their occurrences:

Crown of life (Rev. 2:10; also James 1:12)

Crown of righteousness (2 Tim. 4:8)

Crown of glory (1 Peter 5:4)

Crown of gold (Rev. 4:4)

Crown of rejoicing (1 Thess. 2:19)

Crown of corruption (1 Cor. 9:25)

2) We will overcome the second death 2:11

- There is something worse, far worse, than physical death. It is spiritual and eternal death, what is here called “the second death.” In Rev. 20:14 it is called “the lake of fire,” another way to describe hell. In Rev. 21:8 we are told who experiences the second death: “But the cowards, unbeliever, vile, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars – their share will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.” It is the second death from which Christ came to rescue us. Rev. 20:6 tells us because of Christ, this death “has no power” over us.

- John’s challenge is, “are you listening?” The Spirit is speaking this truth to His churches. There is an eternal reward and an eternal promise. Stay with Jesus no matter what. There is glory on the other side.

Conclusion

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 A.D. 155 Polycarp would be arrested, quickly tried and martyred. He was burned at the stake and then stabbed to finish the job. What I now share is the record of his death, and 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 now 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 has 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 send 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 the 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...plead with the magistrate not to give up his body, "else," said he, "they will abandon the Crucified and begin worshipping 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, know that it hated me before it hated you... Remember the word that I said to you: “A servant is not greater than his master” (John 15:18, 20; *ESV*).