

Crushed for Christ

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Preacher: Mike Scrivani

[0:00] If you want to turn in your Bible, again, Revelation chapter 2, verses 8-11.

! This is the second of the seven churches addressed by our Lord. Ephesus 1, Smyrna 2. And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, The words of the first and the last who died and came to life. 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.

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. 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.

[1:23] How do we as a church measure our successfulness? That's a rhetorical question. You don't have to answer it out loud, but think about it.

How do we determine whether or not we are being successful as a church? I know a lot of times what we do is, yeah, numbers, attendance figures, budget figures, how many baptisms you've had. That's certainly for the SBC. That's how we have been used to recording it for so long is, how many baptisms did you have in a given year? And you'll go to like a conference.

It will be a youth conference maybe, and they determine their success based upon how many baptisms they had, or salvations that they had, or they'll say rededications that they had, which rededication is not anywhere in the Scripture.

It's just kids who are convicted and realize that they've been bad and they need to be good, right? But there's all different things that we do to try to determine whether or not we've been successful as a church, and usually, as Paul said, they are numerical things.

[2:44] That's how we, you know, if you're in a business, how do you determine whether your business has been successful or not? Well, how much profit you've made, right? So we try to measure success based upon the numbers that we see.

But according to Scripture and Christ's message to the church at Smyrna, we shouldn't determine success based solely upon those things.

I want to read to you an account from Cal Thomas. It's a little lengthy, but it's fitting for what we're talking about tonight. He says, We Americans, and he continues, We Americans know nothing about such persecution.

We think we are being persecuted when a newspaper editorial criticizes us or someone uses the Lord's name in vain in our presence or calls us religious fanatics. Most of the world understands persecution in terms of jail, torture, beheadings, and ostracism from family and friends.

He continues on, In effect, he concludes, this means that if you are being persecuted, it isn't you they are persecuting.

[4:34] Rather, it is Jesus in you who is their target. Jesus exposes sin. He is the smell of death to those who are perishing. As my pastor, Dr. Robert Norris, who preached on this sermon, people don't like the smell of death, which it might be argued is their smell, not ours, because we are alive in Christ and they are dead in their sins.

Some try to get rid of the smell by persecuting believers. John 16, 33, Our Lord said, I have said these things to you that in me you may have peace.

In the world you will, not might, you will have tribulation, but take heart, I have overcome the world. Matthew 5, 11, I love this story of George Whitefield.

You may have heard this one before, Tom, but he was talking about the end of a day of ministry, and this was his description of it. He says, I was honored today with having a few stones, dirt, rotten eggs, and pieces of dead cat thrown at me.

When the Lord, see how we determine success in different ways, when the Lord told his disciples that he would build his church in Matthew 16, 18, he included the promise that the gates of Hades will not overpower it.

[6:09] I've struggled in the past to understand what Jesus meant by that phrase, that the gates of hell will not be overcome by it, right, by the church.

Initially, I thought, well, gates aren't used for offense. Think about it, gates are for defense. And that interpretation then, the church then is to storm down the gates of hell, but then I learned that back then that phrase, the gates of Hades, was a common euphemism for death.

What Jesus was saying is that Satan was going to attack the church with deadly force. And as church history reveals to us, Satan has continuously waged a relentless assault on the church.

The whole world system, the entire world system hates God, hates his word, and hates his true church. Have you noticed that in our society?

Have you noticed that there's hostility towards Christianity more so than any other religious group? Have you took notice of that? It seems like Christians are the target more than any other, more so than Muslims or Hindus or Buddhists or even Christian cults like Mormonism.

[7:34] But the same respect that they give to those other religions, they do not give to Bible-believing Christians. In fact, often they say that we're the problem.

I read just today a report, and I wish I could remember who had reported it, but basically the finding was that today in the United States of America, the largest group is atheists, and they put atheists as religion.

Did you read that today? So that's the largest group now, more so than Catholics, more so than evangelicals. And then the report also talked about how as that number has grown, so has the number of suicides in our culture, the use of prescription drugs to handle all kinds of issues with depression or whatnot.

And so it's not a coincidence that as our society becomes more atheistic that we're having all these other problems. People are not satisfied in life.

They're not happy with who they are. They're not hopeful about anything. As a matter of fact, another thing that I thought was interesting here recently is this unplanned movie.

[8:48] Have any of you guys heard of the unplanned movie? It's about, is it Abby Johnson? I believe is her name. She was a, she worked for Planned Parenthood. And I think her job was more, not behind the scenes, but in the front.

And then there was a day where they needed her help, and so they came back and asked her to assist with an abortion, and she watched it taking place and watched the sonogram and watched them tearing this baby out of its mother's womb, and it changed her.

She quit. Now she's a huge pro-life advocate, and so they made a movie about her that's out now.

And it's the, it was the fourth most watched movie, I believe, in the past week or two.

And doing pretty well at the box office, despite the fact that it's not getting any advertisement, because a lot of the major networks, certain social media sites, they do not want to advertise this movie.

They do not want people to go see this picture. And so that's case in point, I believe. The world system has done all that it can to keep people from seeing this movie.

[10:00] Again, TV networks have blocked it. And what's crazy about all this, too, is even the Motion Picture Association of America that rates movies, they gave this movie an R rating, which creates this strange situation, where a girl could have an abortion in states like California, Connecticut, Maine, and New York, and some others, and she can do so without any parental consent.

However, she could not go see a movie about abortion without parental consent. Isn't that weird? Backwards. Satan.

But this instance doesn't compare to the persecution that our Christian brothers in China and sisters in the Middle East are currently facing today. There you probably have heard some reports.

And again, this is not being reported very much either, the persecution that is taking place right now in those nations. Governments are ordering the destruction of church buildings. They are arresting and executing believers on the spot.

This shouldn't be shocking to us. Paul tells us, or he tells Timothy in 2 Timothy 3.12, all who desire to live godly in Christ will be persecuted.

[11:19] Peter told his readers in 1 Peter 4.12, Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you.

So when Christians face persecution, it isn't because they're doing something wrong. It isn't because they're doing something wrong.

The persecution that Christians endure also is not without purpose. 1 Peter 5.10, After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.

James 1.3-4, Our toil and struggles as believers in this world are not in vain. Again, James says, to greet trials with joy, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance, and let endurance have its perfect result, he says, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Persecution also serves the purpose of purifying believers. Hypocrites and false teachers don't stand up in the face of persecution. They run from it.

[12:34] Persecution purges the church of false gospels, of false teachers, of false professions of faith. This being the case, a wave of persecution against the church here in the United States of America would, I think, prove to be, get this, beneficial.

Persecution purifies the church of those who are false. It strengthens and confirms the faith of those who are true, and that fortifies the church as the world aligns against it.

Reality is that persecution does not destroy the church. Persecution makes the church stronger. 2 Corinthians 12, 9-10, But he said to me, Apostle Paul speaking, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.

For when I am weak, then I am strong. Such was the case for the church in Smyrna. A little about the church, the city was located on the coast of the Aegean Sea and was about 40 miles north of Ephesus.

[13:56] Historians say that Smyrna was the most beautiful city in Asia Minor. So while Ephesus, as we talked about last time, it was kind of like the New York of that area. It wasn't the capital, but it was the place where the most important things in society and culture were happening.

Smyrna would be more maybe like San Diego, a beautiful place. This is Rome rewarded us. Well, and also another thing about Smyrna is that they were staunch supporters and allies of Rome. They were so infatuated with Rome that in 195 BC, they erected a temple of worship to Rome. That was what its purpose was. We love you so much, Rome, that we are going to establish a temple for worshiping the Roman Empire. Then a hundred years after that, after it had been reported that some of the Roman armies had come across a bitter winter and bad weather that the soldiers were freezing in, when the people of the citizens of Smyrna heard the report, all who were assembled, they said disrobed and they collected all their clothes and they took them to the freezing soldiers.

And then after they did that, Rome rewarded their loyalty by choosing it over other applicants as the site of a new temple that was dedicated to the Emperor Tiberius in AD 26.

[15:21] Smyrna was home to one of the most famous streets in the world at that time. It was called the Street of Gold. The city was surrounded by a really large, hilly area, which is where the Street of Gold was located.

At one end of the street was Sybil. This was the ancient Persian mother of the gods. And then at the other end of the street was a temple to Zeus.

And in between those two temples was a temple to Apollo and Asclepius and Aphrodite. So that was their golden street, street of gold.

Unlike Ephesus, Smyrna is still a thriving city to this day. It's known as Izmir, and it is one of the largest cities in modern day Turkey. Also, unlike Ephesus, there are still Christians in that city. The Lord eventually removed the lampstand from Ephesus, but there is still light in Smyrna. While most of them are Catholic, Coptic, Orthodox, or Syriac, there are faithful, Bible-believing Christians still alive in that city today, and they are still under intense persecution at the hands of the Muslims who occupy that region.

[16:41] As was customary in ancient letters, the writer identifies himself at the beginning of the letter instead of signing his name at the end. And of course, he identifies himself as the first and the last who died and came to life.

This is the Lord. The statement is an affirmation of his divine nature. Like God, as God, he is eternal, meaning that he has always been and that he always will be.

He transcends time, space, and creation. Yet amazingly, the eternal God became man, and he died, and he came back to life.

This is a profound mystery. How can the ever-living one who transcends time, space, and history die? Well, Peter provides that answer to that question in 1 Peter 3:18.

He says, Christ was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit. He died as a man for sin, and now lives, as the author of Hebrews puts it, according to the power of an indestructible life.

[17:54] Hebrews 7:16. To say it another way, death could not hold him. The grave could not contain him. His resurrection from the grave is the proof that God accepted his sacrifice as full atonement for the sins of his people.

The resurrection is also the guarantee of their hope for eternal life. With these words of reminder, then, our Lord brought comfort to his persecuted church.

Christ reminded them of the far worse suffering that he endured for them to purchase their redemption from sin and death.

And he's also reminding them of his presence with them as they endured these persecutions. With these reminders, they would be encouraged, then, to stay the course, to face whatever threat came their way, even if that threat resulted in their death.

death. They could hold fast to the promise that Christ had made to them in John's gospel. John 11:25-26. I am the resurrection and the life.

[19:10] He who believes in me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Death could not hold them any more than it could hold Jesus Christ.

In Revelation 2:9, the Lord continues his reassuring words. He says to them, I know your tribulation and your poverty, but you are rich in the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

So, all things being considered, Smyrna was a difficult place to live a life as a Christian. So, first of all, we see the Lord commends the church at Smyrna, beginning of verse 9.

Not only did they face tribulation, but they were also in poverty. The Greek word literally means to have nothing. And so, some scholars speculate that many in this church were probably slaves, and that whatever possessions that they may have had were probably taken as a result of the persecution that they endured.

So, these people had to scrounge out a living in a life together. They were in poverty. However, Christ includes this parenthetical note, that though they are in poverty, yet they are rich.

[20:37] Contrast that with his condemning words to the church at Laodicea when we get there. In chapter 3, verse 17, where there he says, You say, I am rich and have become wealthy and have need of nothing, and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked.

The Laodiceans might have had material wealth, but in the things that mattered most, they were severely lacking. The believers in Smyrna may not have had much, but they were rich spiritually. The Lord's message to them is the only message that does not contain a note of condemnation. Isn't that interesting? Think about it.

The poorest, most persecuted church receives no condemnation from the Lord. You know, I think when we get together as an association and all the numbers are reported, nobody would look at the church who gives the least with the fewest amount and think that they were the most successful church.

As a matter of fact, I think some of the larger church would look at them with pity. What's going on there? What's wrong with that situation? But the Lord doesn't take that approach with the church in Smyrna.

[22:00] The world would look at that church and they would scoff at it. They'd mock it. To other churches, they might be left to believe that this church was receiving God's judgment.

The Greek word translated Smyrna was used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew word for myrrh, a resinous substance used as a perfume for the living and, more importantly, for the dead.

Its association with death then perfectly pictures the suffering church at Smyrna. Myrrh is produced by crushing a fragrant plant.

The church at Smyrna was crushed by persecution, but it gave off a fragrant smell, aroma of faithfulness to God.

At Smyrna, unlike Ephesus, there was no warning of lacking love for Christ because these believers loved Him. They remained faithful to Him.

[23:07] Throughout their faithfulness to Him, even though they were hated by the world, they remained faithful to Him. So the Lord commends them. The Lord does issue a condemnation.

The Lord condemns the Jewish community in Smyrna. Condemns the Jewish community in Smyrna. Not only were the Christians in Smyrna persecuted by those who worshiped the pantheon of Greek gods, but they were also persecuted by the Jews of that community.

Jesus says that they are those who say they are Jews and are not, but are, a synagogue of Satan. The Jewish community in Smyrna hated Christians.

They spread false rumors about them and sought to incite the rest of the community against them. Why would they do that? Well, because they hated the gospel.

They hated the notion, the thought, that Jesus was the Christ. Throughout Christ's earthly ministry, if you remember, and the ministry of the apostles in the book of Acts, we see that the Jews were constantly a threat to the church.

[24:23] In Acts 4, verse 18, the Sanhedrin commanded the apostles, do not speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. Then when the apostles continued, the high priest rose up along with all his associates and they were filled with jealousy.

They laid hands on the apostles and they put them in prison. Acts 13 records the Jewish leaders' reaction to Paul's preaching in Antioch. It says there, but when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and they began contradicting the things spoken by Paul and were blaspheming. But the Jews incited the devout women of prominence and the leading men of the city and instigated a persecution against Paul and Barnabas and they drove them out of the district. It continued in Iconium.

Acts chapter 14, the Jews who disbelieved stirred up the minds of the Gentiles and embittered them against the brethren. And when an attempt was made by both the Gentiles and the Jews with their rulers to mistreat and to stone them, they became aware of it and they fled.

Trouble continues to follow in Lystra where Jews came from Antioch in Iconium and having won over the crowds, they stoned Paul. They dragged him out of the city supposing that he was dead.

[25:43] That's not all. From there in Thessalonica, Acts 17, the Jews becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the marketplace formed the mob and set the city in uproar.

The persecution that the Christians in Acts endured was the same kind of persecution that the Christians in Smyrna were facing. So desperate were the Jews to put an end to the church that they joined with pagans, with heathens to accomplish this task.

Similar to the way that the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem teamed up with the Romans to put Christ to death. Christ calls them the synagogue of Satan.

Man, that's a chilling statement, isn't it? The synagogue of Satan. Like calling a church the church of the devil. The church of the devil where people worship Satan.

They thought that they were doing the will of God but their religion was empty. It was worthless.

Just as worthless as the pagan religions and emperor worship which dominated the city of Smyrna.

[26:59] Jesus says that they are those who say that they are Jews and are not. What Jesus is saying there isn't that they were pretending to have Jewish been descended from Jewish descent but it's an echo of what Paul was saying in Romans chapter 2 verses 28 through 29.

There he says for he is not a Jew who is one outwardly nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh but he is a Jew who is one inwardly and circumcision is that which is of the heart by the spirit not by the letter and his praise is not from men but from God.

So yeah by birth they were Jews but in reality they were as guilty of what they accused the Christians of being. They were the ones who were blasphemers.

They were the ones who were pagans. They were the ones separate from God. They were the ones who were enemies of Christ. Third we see the Lord issues a command to the church at Smyrna in the beginning of verse 10.

He says do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold the devil is about to cast some of you into prison so that you will be tested and you will have tribulation for 10 days.

[28 : 23] The Lord tells it like it is. They've suffered and they'll continue to suffer. His command is that they not fear what is about to happen to them because He would give them the strength to endure it.

Specifically the Lord predicted that the devil was about to cast some of them into prison. God's purpose in permitting that imprisonment was so that they would be tested the Lord says.

Then by successfully enduring that trial they would prove the reality of their faith. Be strengthened and prove once again that Satan cannot destroy genuine faith.

The battle taking place in Smyrna was just one skirmish in an age-long war of Satan against God. It has always been Satan's plan to attack God's children and to attempt to destroy their faith.

That is why one of His titles in Scripture is the accuser of the brethren. That's what He does. He attacks God's children.

[29 : 36] However, as we see in Scripture, He will not succeed. John 6, 39 Jesus declared, I give eternal life to them and they will never perish.

Speaking of His church, speaking of His people, and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father who has given them to Me is greater than all and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.

John 10, 28-29. John 6, 39 is this. This is the will of Him who sent Me that of all He has given to Me I lose nothing, but will raise it up on the last day.

That gives me such joy. You know, because if I could lose my salvation, I would have lost it a long time ago.

You know what I'm saying? But thank God that that is not the case. You know, as big and bad as Satan is, he is not a match for God.

[30 : 47] And he cannot do anything to us that God does not allow or permit him to do, will him to do. So we can take heart and be people of courage.

Romans 8, 28-29, Paul traces the unbreakable chain from foreknowledge of God's people to predestination, to effectual calling, to justification, to glorification.

And again, no one, as we see there, is lost along the way. Those who are foreknown are predestined, those who are predestined are called, those who are called are justified, those who are justified are glorified.

Nobody gets lost. They each make it into that next category. All who are called will be kept by God. They will be made like Christ in glory. Though Satan is doomed to fail, it doesn't stop him from trying.

[31 : 45] one of the most notable attacks on saving faith is recorded in the book of Job, where again, understand, with God's permission, he took from Job his family, his possession, his physical health, to the point where all that Job had left was his nagging wife, and his friends, who gave inept counsel, that only served to distract him.

But through all this, Job 1.22 says, through all of this, Job did not sin, nor did he blame God. And then Job in 13.15 gives this triumphant declaration, though he slay me, yet I will hope in him.

I love that verse too. There's a great song out there, Shane and Shane. I just came across it. If you listen to that song, I posted it on Facebook, if you're friends with me on Facebook, then go listen to this song.

It's kind of long. There's a snippet of John Piper in there. It's a beautiful song. Though he slay me, though he crush me, yet I will hope in him all the more. We need more songs like that.

In the New Testament, Satan sought unsuccessfully, if you remember, to destroy Peter's faith.

Jesus warned him in Luke 22, 31-32. Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat.

[33 : 18] And again, another encouraging thing, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail, and you, once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers. As with believers at Smyrna, Jesus foretold Satan's attack on Peter, but also that they would successfully endure whatever he threw their way.

These scriptures, along with many others, speak to the fact that God is sovereign, that God is in control of all circumstances. Satan would attack, Christ would strengthen them, they would endure it, and it would eventually come to an end and they would remain faithfully his.

Fourthly, we say the Lord gives counsel to the church at Smyrna. He says to them, be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life. 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. So here Christ concludes his message to the church at Smyrna with some words of encouragement that those who remain faithful to the Lord unto death will receive as their reward the crown, the Stephanas, the victor's crown of life.

The crown of genuine saving faith is eternal life. Scripture teaches that Christ will, that Christians I should say, will persevere.

[34 : 51] The Westminster Confession of Faith, I want to share this portion with you. I think it speaks very clearly and truthfully to this. They said, they whom God has accepted in his beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end and be eternally saved.

That is the unmistakable teaching of Scripture. Thank God. As noted last week, the phrase, he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches, closes each of the seven letters to the seven churches, and there it stresses the importance of what God says and the promises that he has made as a result of their being in Christ.

Though persecuted believers may suffer the first physical death, they will never, however, experience the second death, which is eternal damnation in hell.

The persecuted yet faithful church at Smyrna stands for all time and is an example of those who have been saved because they loyally confessed him before me.

Jesus says that he will also confess them before the Father. You know what's interesting to me as I thought about this as well is Christian celebrities.

[36 : 25] And if you ever go to a conference, and I'm talking like good teachers, not bad teachers, but like the Shepherds Conference, for example, you had John MacArthur, and you had Sinclair Ferguson, you had Steve Lawson, people that you've seen at these different conferences, and many others, Al Moeller, and even in a situation like that, it can get kind of weird.

Justin Peters, who was on the American Gospel, he was just sitting, he was in the crowd, and just to see people flock to them, I heard a guy talking about how I got this, I got a picture with this guy, I got a picture with this guy, I got a picture with this guy, and just kind of, he was really happy about it. I'm not saying that it's wrong to take pictures with them, but we kind of, we create like a weird celebrity vibe with our preachers and leaders who we really like, and you see that when we went to the SBC convention, Matt Chandler was there, and some others, and people just kind of like, there he is, oh my goodness, what's he doing?

Ah, I've seen him in real life, I can go tell everybody about it, you know, blah, blah, blah, they're just people, but we make celebrities out, and here's what I want to say, we know all those names, what I find interesting is not one person is named in this church, you ever notice that?

Nobody, nobody, none of those believers in Smyrna, we don't know for sure what their names were, this church who Christ addresses, but I'll tell you this, I believe that when we get to heaven, we will, and those ones who we think are so important here, not saying that they're not, but I'm going to say that when we get to heaven, those are the ones who are the real, Christ is the hero, but those are the ones who I think will hear those stories, hear those names, those are the ones who I think we should admire, the ones who didn't want or seek to make a name for themselves, they just wanted to seek to make a name for Christ, to make the name of Christ famous, not their own names, and I think that's something important for us to remember is that, you know, you may think, well, I'm not really spiritual, or not spiritual, but spiritually gifted, and I don't do much, you know, I only help out with Awana,

[38 : 52] I only help out in the nursery, I only do this, I only do that, I'm telling you what you do is so important, and it's people like the Christians at Smyrna who we don't know their names, but their testimony lives on today.

Just as myrrh, again, had to be crushed to yield its pleasing aroma, and just as it was used to cover the scent of dead bodies because of its powerful aroma, as we covered a few weeks ago in Men's Night, Nicodemus, and how he brought a hundred pounds of myrrh mixed with aloes with him to wrap Christ's body for burial, so God permitted Satan to crush these believers who were under intense persecution, and Christ's letter to them confirms that the crushing that they endured was pleasing to him, a pleasing aroma of their faithfulness.

This is a great church. As I was talking with Tom in the foyer, a good point that he mentioned is one of the things that was so special about this church is that, you know, those who are fake, those who are false, those who are spiritually weak, when persecution comes, they run, they hide, they flee. not this church. So, of all the churches here, what should we as a church aspire to be most like? This church.

This church. Which means that, you know, persecution won't come to a church that doesn't share the gospel. Persecution won't come to a church that stays within its building and safety.

[40 : 45] Persecution won't come. persecution will come when we go and we share the good news of Jesus Christ. And it's not something that we should hide from, it's not something that we should run from, it's something that we should joyfully endure that the name of Jesus Christ would be made much of.