

Eastertide: Revelation Letters to the Churches #3

Letter to Smyrna

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I want to tell you about Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, born in 59 AD, died in 156, and was a disciple of John. Revelation was most likely written in 60 AD. Polycarp most likely heard this letter read right after it was written and understood its implications. He died a martyr's death, one of the most famous martyr's deaths next to Steven. The story is that he was a bishop for SIX decades: he was known to bleed scripture: he would talk about Pauls' letters, etc. before the NT canon was even formed. He cared for his community for a very long time. In Smyrna, there were Gladiator games which killed Christians for entertainment. The story is that the crowds became bored watching Christians get burned alive and get eaten by lions with no complaint or resistance. So they called for Polycarp to be killed and he was able to escape. But eventually they found him and when they did, he asked for one hour to pray and during this time, he fed his capturers with the Gospel. We have an eyewitness account of this: he taught for 2 hours. By the time those who captured him got back to the Games, they didn't want to kill him and tried to convince him to say that Caesar was Lord. He refused and says:

"eighty and six years have I served him, and he never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?"

The magistrate tries to convince the crowds; Polycarp says he wants to talk with him alone. The Jewish people were eager to gather firewood so they could kill him. He doesn't need to be nailed: the reports are that he wasn't burning but just standing in the fire. So they had to stab him instead. The fire surrounded him but didn't burn him. The legend says his blood spilled out and put out the fire. But for the next 100 years, this story bolstered the church: the way he stood for what he believed in and would not denounce Jesus. Persecution accelerated and people followed Polycarp's example.

Last week we talked about Ephesus losing their first love; they had adult hearts and needed to do the things they used to do to find this love again.

Next, we read the letter to Smyrna. Here is a map of all the cities that receive letters:



The area around Smyrna is thought of as Myrrh “Bitter” because it only smells good but doesn’t taste good. In fact, It is good for making dead people smell good. Smyrna was a melting pot of cultures. It was also a place of cult emperor worship: they were the first to have a temple to Roma. Interestingly, there were no other gods but Roma: they were monotheistic. Just Caesar, Roma! In 17 BC an earthquake destroyed the city and instead of abandoning it, they rebuilt it with wide streets and being careful to map it well. The people were very proud of their city and they loved Roma. They were very loyal to Rome which is very different from Ephesus.

Hear a couple of things: When it comes to suffering all of us face affliction in this life. Some of us will be slandered when we face this. Some of us then will experience persecution until death. Polycarb experienced all three. You and I will experience one or all of these! This letter is really to all of us who are being persecuted, being slandered, and/or living under affliction.

“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. 9 I know your afflictions and your poverty—

There is a distress here: when you are very young and your parents ask you to jump in the pool, they ask you to trust them. They are saying they understand what you are going through: you just need to jump! "You are going to be OK. You can trust me. I am in control."

The key word is "I KNOW"... it's not because I have an internet camera on you, **it's because I walk with you**. Affliction is pressing in on you and us. It's like I handed you 100 pounds of kettlebells and you had to walk around the city with them. This is like carrying the world's temptations around: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and boastful pride of life....**they all counter the mission we are called to**. It's like the kettlebells dumped onto him: it's like holding these and trying to live out life as a servant.

This leads to a certain kind of poverty: there are two words for poverty in the NT: one means **you have to work for a living**. The other one means **destitute**. I think there are two things going on: You might have been a slave in Smyrna or you are living under the pressure of mental poverty produced by the lust of the lush, flesh, and pride of life. It's like saying Caesar is Lord...

Yet you are rich!

This is his encouragement:

Eph 1:3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Jesus is KING and Lord...we have every spiritual blessing available. I can rush into the throne room of God any time and ask forgiveness. Also, the Holy Spirit is with us in the midst of this...he is right here with me. This is a spiritual blessing: the one who is first, last, and speaks me into existence allows me to speak with the authority of the king to one another. It is weighty to be weighed down by the world but you are spiritually well endowed.

Therefore, in this way all of us face poverty.

I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

I think this is one of the harshest things Jesus says in the whole New Testament. Slander often comes from people who love you and are inside your community. It's a misrepresentation of you and actually, *you can't have this happen if you aren't known*. I think the Jewish people have been persecuted their whole life and have made themselves prominent. They are willing to speak poorly about the Christians to get them out of the way. Others would say this slander is coming from Greek converts. Either way, *it's from people who know you*. **The important thing is that when you are slandered, it's not about the person who is slandered: It's a spiritual battle.** This letter is really instructions about how to handle this:

- You should get on your knees and
- Show kindness to them,
- Tell the enemy he has no place in your life.

Jesus has the right to judge them but he doesn't. He tells you who they are instead.

Hold onto this because it is brought to life more in the passage

10 Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days.

What does **ten days** mean? This refers to a Roman law that allowed citizens to do this when they didn't like what someone did.

One other part of suffering to consider: **James 1:2-4**

2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters,^[a] whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. 4 Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

This develops maturity: when we are not being persecuted, we don't actually need anything. It was my birthday this week and I didn't really need the gifts I got. When I was

a child, I thought I **needed** all my gifts! But you get to a point where you realize you don't lack anything.

When a child loses track of mom at the store, there is panic in their voice until they hear her voice: ***this is like us hearing Jesus in the midst of our persecution.*** "Don't not be afraid." Jesus says this over and over in the NT: he is doing this for us as well: his hand is on our shoulder and he is saying "**Do NOT BE AFRAID.**"

I Peter 4:13 But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed

When we suffer, we step into the suffering of Jesus and when we share this, it builds intimacy with him and that **we carry into the Kingdom something that is different from anyone else.** It builds a different kind of relationship with Jesus. You have something to share with Him! When you see him in all his glory, there will be a deep taste of him in the way we shared in suffering.

Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown.

Crowns are super important in Greco-Roman culture. You get a crown for everything! They are an honor. He says to be faithful and you will get life as your crown. I'm pretty sure Jesus isn't not saying, if you fail, you are not going to have life. I think he is saying like Polycarp, if we stand under affliction, we will have an award and we will be honored. What this crown is, I'm not fully sure. But it's deep and rich in the kingdom. He goes on:

11 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.

The lake of fire, the second death: there is a consequence for all who reject Jesus. Born twice, die once: there is only one death if you've been born again. The descriptions of people dying in the Gladiator Games is gross: The first death hurts but if you are here, you won't be hurt by the second death if you are following Jesus.

Jesus says these things to us in our afflictions, slander, and death:

1. Trust him: he is the first and last
2. He cares: he knows you

3. Be faithful: you aren't alone; you don't need to be afraid
4. He will reward us: there will be a reward for walking through this affliction.

This is my encouragement to you!

I recommend "History Lives" for children. It's very informative: You can borrow mine or Amazon.

Questions:

Sometimes I go through something that I think is persecution but it's really the consequence of my sin. How do I respond to this in that light? Maybe I should have the same response? Maybe it's better not to address whether we did this to ourselves or not. [-we don't realize how afflicted the culture around us is in terms of sin.](#)

Jesus cares and He knows: you may have said this but i thought about how He went through way more than we ever would or could: Read Psalm 25 which addresses a lot of these ideas.