

Smyrna

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[0 : 0 0] So we're here in Revelation 2, we've got the letter to the church in Smyrna in front of us. I don't know if any of you do holidays in Turkey. I've never been to Turkey myself, but Smyrna is now known as Izmir, I think, in Turkey.

And a popular holiday destination for lots of people. So that's where we are, but of course we're moving back about 1900 years in time to see the church in Smyrna and what it was going through.

Now, if I was to describe myself as a bimbo this evening, you might take me the wrong way. Because the meaning of words change over time. A bimbo apparently used to mean tough guy in Italian.

Now it means dumb blonde or something like that, I think. I hope none of you will grin at me this evening, because a grin originally meant to bear your teeth in anger.

So that's what a grin was way back long ago. Words change their meaning over time, or we change the content of what a word means over time.

[1 : 2 6] And church is also a word whose meaning we have changed over time. So if we say the word church, often what we mean by it isn't really what the Bible means by it.

So if I talk about church, you might think of architecture and of a building such as this, the church. I'm going to go to church, I'm going to come to this building.

By church sometimes we mean activities. You know, the church is where we meet with other Christians to do stuff. I'm going to church can also mean I'm going to go to the service on a Sunday morning or a prayer gathering or whatever it might be.

So we sometimes think of meetings or activities or buildings, and that's what we call church. That's not what the Bible means by church, and that's not what revelation means when it's speaking to the churches.

They didn't have a building like this in Smyrna. They met in people's homes. And what the church is, of course, when we look at it and understand it as the Bible describes it, the church is a community of people, a family, a community, a gathering of people, a body of people.

[2 : 4 9] And that community has a really distinctive identity. And its identity is this, that these people have a passionate love, reverence and worship for Jesus Christ as their risen, reigning Savior.

So this is a community of people defined by a passionate love for Christ as Savior. And when this letter is written to the church, and of course it's here for our benefit as well, we're being addressed as a community of people who are in love with Jesus Christ as our Savior.

And what Jesus wants to say to the church is this, in the letter to the Smyrna, what he's saying is that, as the church, your life is rooted in my life, and the power of my life is present among you and in you as the church.

And the power of my life within you is so remarkable and so great that that life that flows within you will cause the world around you to think, to question and to be provoked.

That's what the power of Christ's life among us ought to do. It ought to create within the church and within the people of God a life so different, that everybody else sort of has a big question mark coming up in front of them.

[4 : 39] They see the power of the life of the people of God and it makes them think, it makes them question. What is it about these people? What does their life say about the way I'm living?

How does their life challenge the way I'm living? What does my life look like in the light of the way God's people live in this world?

And so in other words, if you want to put it this way, the power of the life of Christ among us ought, in some sense, is to be provocative. It ought to really provoke other people. And that's what's happening in Smyrna, isn't it?

The people of Smyrna are provoked by the life of the church, to such an extent that they are fighting back, hitting back, and really beginning to persecute the church.

The doctrine that underlies all this is the doctrine of the resurrection. It is because Jesus has died and risen again and lives forevermore, that there is the power of a new life present among us.

[5 : 55] Because He's alive, we're alive. We're changed forever by the resurrection. Christians are people who've died to their old way of living and have begun a new way of life through Jesus Christ.

And the strength of our life rests on His resurrection life. And so the letter begins with that kind of outlook.

These are the words of Him who is the first and last, who died and came to life again. The resurrection life of Jesus is the foundation of the new life that we're living, a life which is intended to provoke and challenge the world around us, so that they too will seek God.

The resurrection then for the church is a really very important doctrine. And of course at the same time it's a controversial doctrine.

Lots of people find the idea of resurrection difficult to swallow, to grasp, or to view as credible.

[7 : 11] But as the church, as God's people, then of course we believe there is great and good reason to believe in Christ's resurrection.

We believe there's strong historical evidence, of course, for the life of Jesus. We believe that there's strong historical evidence for the crucifixion of Jesus and His death.

And we also believe that there is good, strong, reliable evidence for the resurrection. And if the resurrection is true, of course, then that changes everything about this world.

It turns all that we believe and think on its head. And if Christ is risen, then that should change the way we view life and of course the way we view death as well.

So why are we so confident about the resurrection? Why are we so strong in our conviction that the resurrection of Jesus is a real, literal, physical and historical event?

[8 : 21] Well, briefly, three things I'm going to mention right now. One is the strength of eyewitness testimony recorded for us in the Bible.

Paul at one point cites a group of over 500 eyewitnesses to the resurrection. And we have the gospel accounts with numerous different eyewitnesses to the risen life of Jesus.

The second thing is that just weeks after the crucifixion of Jesus, Peter, one of the disciples, stood in Jerusalem.

You don't get a more skeptical audience than you would have had in Jerusalem that day. And he clearly and firmly asserts without challenge that Christ's grave is empty and that he is risen.

And so from the very earliest times amongst the population of Jerusalem and around it, the resurrection of Jesus Christ was asserted and believed and taught.

[9 : 33] And thirdly, of course, we look at the history of the church. We look at people like Peter who, before the crucifixion, was a kind of Jesus denying, freaked out, trembling wreck.

But who, after the resurrection, is a transformed person because he has discovered a new power, the power of the risen Christ in his life.

And from Peter and the other apostles, of course, there is this amazing surge of Christianity from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth.

And so the rapid expansion of the church and the remarkable witness of the church in the first and second centuries speaks again of the change that takes place in the world that we believe is rooted in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

That resurrection means everything to God's people. Without it, we're told our faith is in vain. But with it, we believe that powerful and great change can take place in our lives and in the lives of others around us.

[11 : 03] And it's that change, of course, I've said already, it's the change in the people in the church of Smyrna that's beginning to bring persecution on them, that's provoking other people and bringing out their hostility.

And we believe that the book of Revelation was written around AD 95, just at the end of the first century, and it was written to churches that were young, immature and struggling.

And some of those struggles we read about in the letters here in the first two or three chapters of Revelation. The church in Ephesus that Derek looked at with you a couple of weeks ago spoke about a loss of passion, a loss of overwhelming love for Jesus.

This letter looks at persecution as one of the struggles of the church. Other letters deal with moral compromise and a way of living that's really inconsistent with gospel truth.

So here were gospel churches, but they lacked gospel living. And that's another issue that the church then and today struggles with.

[12 : 17] So around AD 95, the Roman emperor Domitian has allowed a very strong persecution against the church across the empire.

And when we struggle as Christians in different ways, when we struggle morally, when we struggle with doubt, when we struggle with persecution, when we struggle because we're just not really in love with Jesus anymore, well where does the Bible take us? The Bible takes us in all of these different circumstances to the same place. It takes us back to the feet of Jesus Christ.

And so these letters written to a struggling church begin of course in chapter one where we read earlier with an amazing vision of Jesus Christ that is rooted in the history and scriptures of the Old Testament.

And yet it takes us and places our imaginations, our minds and our desires and our thoughts in heaven before the throne of God and before Christ Jesus the Savior.

So we have this great vision, we read about it in verses 12 onwards, using the language of Daniel and other apocalyptic language.

[13 : 48] The Son of Man dressed in a robe reaching to his feet in verse 13. A golden sash, his head and hair, white light wool as white as snow, his feet light bronze, a sword coming out of his mouth, his face like the sun shining in all its brilliance and what happens well before this great vision of Jesus, John falls as if dead.

And so John takes us in the same direction towards Jesus. Why? Because John wants to convince me and you and the Smyrnans that Jesus is worth living for and that Jesus is not only worth living for, he's also worth dying for.

That's how great Jesus is. He's not kind of worthy of a little love or a mild affection or a little commitment. He's worthy of absolutely everything we've got to give him.

He's worthy of great love and great passions and great desire and great sacrifice and offering him little love and little passion and little desires of course is just an insult to his majesty and his glory.

And it's trivializing who he is. So here is this church, the Smyrnans church and they're being persecuted and they're being given a vision of Jesus that says, will you live and die for Jesus Christ?

[15 : 26] No matter how dark the days get, no matter how deep the suffering, no matter how lost and lonely you feel, will you live and die for Jesus Christ?

One of the original recipients of this letter we think was a young guy who had the name of Paulicarp. And he lived in Smyrna. He would have heard probably this letter read when it was received. And he went on into leadership. He became an elder in the church in Smyrna.

Eventually he became the bishop of Smyrna and 60 years later he was killed for his testimony. So this is real life, real happenings, real events, real people dying for the saviour that they love.

Now when we speak of martyrdom today, I don't know what you think of. If I say the word martyr to you today, I don't know what you think of but lots of people think of jihadis, don't they?

That's what a martyr seems to be to us these days. Suicide bombers with bad videos telling us how they're going to blow themselves to pieces and how they're going to blow other people to pieces for the sake of their religion.

[16 : 50] So that's a kind of modern idea of martyrdom. He said it's not really martyrdom is it? It's just murder. And martyrdom is not about blowing yourself up in the name of a cause.

It's about religious fanaticism and fundamentalism. Martyrdom is when others take your life from you because you won't compromise on the way you live.

I was in a church in Germany a few weeks ago and the sermon was in German so I didn't understand everything perfectly but somebody was translating in my ear as it went along.

And this guy was also mentioning the martyrdom of Stephen in the New Testament and he said something that really struck home with me. He said this, he said that the most important thing about a martyr is not how they die but how they have lived.

The most important thing about a martyr is not how they die but how they have lived because it's the quality of a person's life that brings martyrdom.

[18 : 00] It's the power with which that life speaks to the surrounding society and culture that brings martyrdom. And so it's the life that's lived that really counts, not the way death is experienced.

And these people are going to face martyrdom because of the life that they've lived for Jesus. They have truly lived it for Jesus. They don't just kind of say I'm living for Jesus and get on with business as usual.

To them living for Jesus means changing the way they live in every circumstance and every situation. It means living, putting Jesus first, letting gospel grace flow through their lives, seeking the power of the Holy Spirit day after day so that they'll be led by the Spirit to be witnesses for God in a fallen world.

And so the question that the martyr poses for you is not really how you're going to die because none of us have got any information about that.

The question the martyr poses for us is how are you going to live? And that's the really important question. Are you living a life of that kind of quality for Christ that so exalts Jesus through your character and your speech, that so exemplifies the love of God, that the world is provoked by it?

[19 : 42] Especially young guys here, you have to think what's the quality of the life you're living?

You've got so much opportunity and so many choices to make about what you aspire to be in this world. And my prayer is that you aspire to be the kind of men whose lives will speak so powerfully of Christ that people around you will be provoked and challenged and made to question.

When we look through the letter we see some of what's going on. As I said in verse 8, the emphasis is on resurrection, the first and the last who came and who died and who's come to life.

In verse 17 and 18 of chapter 1, so those same truths are present. So what I'm trying to say here is verse 8 in chapter 2 echoes 17 and 18 in chapter 1.

So read 17 and 18 in chapter 1. I see him, I fell at his feet as though dead, he placed his right hand on me and said, what? Don't be afraid. So that's the message these persecuted Christians need, don't be afraid.

[21 : 01] Why not? I am the first and the last, I am the living one, I was dead and behold I am alive forever and ever. His life is the source and strength of life for us.

I am the first and the last, I am alive forever more. I died but I came to life again. What does this tell us? Well, it tells us of course, we would say theologically, Jesus Christ is sovereign.

He reigns over life and death. In other words, Jesus is in complete control, absolute control of everything that's going on in this world and in your life.

And that's a great comfort to suffering people because one of the difficulties when we suffer of course is that everything feels out of control to us. We can't manage our circumstances, we can't limit the difficulties, we can't control the damage.

And that means life feels very, very threatening and we feel panicked by it. But Jesus says, well, don't worry, I'm the first and the last, I'm alive forever, I'm in control.

[22 : 10] We may feel fragile and broken but our life is hidden with Christ and God and so we're safe in His hands. He's in control. If you feel threatened, if you feel that life's out of control, then remember you're not sovereign but Jesus is.

And then He says, I know your afflictions. One of the worst things about suffering is that often we feel alone and we feel that nobody knows what we are going through.

And that makes us feel lonely, sad and deeply unhappy. Nobody knows the trouble I've seen. There's a song, I looked it up on YouTube before I came out tonight.

Louis Armstrong used to sing, Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen. And just to read a few of the words, Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen. Nobody Knows but Jesus.

Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen. Glory, Hallelujah. Sometimes I'm up, sometimes I'm down. Oh yes, Lord, sometimes I'm almost to the ground.

[23 : 19] Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen. Nobody Knows but Jesus. And that's what Jesus is. This truth echoes what is here.

I know your afflictions. You're not alone. You feel alone, you're not alone. He's inside your troubles.

There's a great verse in Isaiah that says, in all your afflictions, He was afflicted. And your poverty, I know your poverty.

Smyrna, or is it, Mary, was the pride of Asia. It was an economic hot house. There was a lot of money to be made in Smyrna. There was a lot of wealth going round in Smyrna.

And yet the Christians live in poverty. Why? Because if you were a Christian in Smyrna and you ran the bakery, a baker shop, then one day you realize you don't have any customers anymore. Why not?

[24 : 22] Because you're a Christian. You're sitting in your house one day, there's a knock on the door, your furniture's taken out, you're taken out, the door is sealed. Christians were having their property confiscated in these cities.

Their rights denied and abused. They paid a great cost for following Jesus. They were poor, materially very poor.

But Jesus says, but rich, materially poor but spiritually rich in the gospel. Rich in love and hope because of Christ, rich in the things that last.

I know the slander, He says. He knows what people say about them. He knows the words that hurt, the words that alienate, the words that make them feel abused and dirty and horrible and alone.

And then He says to, I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you and you'll suffer persecution for 10 days. What's going on here? Well, the devil is testing them even to the point of death.

[25 : 33] And God sees this happening beforehand and God permits this. But God is saying, of course, that even as I permit this, I'm still in control and I'm not going to permit any more than you can bear.

You will suffer persecution for 10 days. Not quite sure exactly if that's literal 10 days. Probably not. Seems a symbolic reference of some kind, but it's limitation of time.

He's saying, even this is under my control, my limitations, and I will not let you go through more than you can bear. And I too will give you grace for every sorrow.

And so in your dark and difficult and lonely and misunderstood situations, what's the hope? Well, the hope is one, that it's not going to go on forever.

He will limit it to the hope is he won't give you more than you can bear. And thirdly, that there is a great reservoir of grace for you to go to every day.

[26 : 38] None of us can bear the sorrow and grief of life in our own. That's what grace is for. And we need to just keep going back to the well, thinking the grace that God provides daily.

And so to these Christians, he says what? Well, he says, be faithful, verse 10. Be faithful even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.

So that's a kind of Olympic or athletic picture, the crown of life. It's the garland, the wreath that the victor would wear at the races. It's a Champions League medal standing on the podium in front of the stadium.

Arms in the air singing your songs. I'm a winner, I'm a champion. I had a little guy in my church in Kirkawde. He was very little.

He had no teeth. He was a chronic alcoholic. Even when he was a Christian, he couldn't overcome his drink addiction. And he had a very sad lonely life. He'd been homeless when he became a Christian.

[27 : 45] And when he spoke, because he had no teeth, and he just sort of grilled. His name is Jimmy. And Jimmy was diagnosed with terminal cancer.

And the cancer was in his throat and in his mouth. And that was going to make his speech even worse, of course. And the day after he got his terminal diagnosis, I went to see him just to see how he was doing.

And he said two things to me. He said one, he said, I'm in the Lord's hands. And Jimmy's speaking, I'm in the Lord's hands. And then the next thing he said to me was, and he was a tiny little frail man, he said, I'm a conqueror.

That's what he said, I'm a conqueror. He knew that he would be standing on the winners podium when he died. A victor in life and death.

That's the hope. That's the power of the life of Jesus. And that's what allows us to be faithful, even to the point of death.

[28 : 57] We're told that there are two kinds of death, not going to go into this. There's physical death and really Christians, Jesus says, Christians, you don't give a hoot about that, okay? That's not what matters.

We're all going to die and experience that physical death which separates us from the world. But what we really want to be concerned about is the second death, eternal death, spiritual death, the death that would separate us from God for eternity.

And not everyone will experience physical death, not everyone will experience eternal death or the second death. If you're united by faith to Christ, then nothing can separate you from the love of God and Christ Jesus.

You don't even need to fear death. Because Christ is there in power, in life and in death to give you victory.

You will overcome, you will not be hurt at all, he says in verse 11, by the second death. So here we have people being told, stay true to Jesus, be faithful.

[30 : 10] And they're being encouraged in this letter. There's no criticism in the letter, although they're struggling, although they're going through dark times. The letter isn't critical, just encouragement.

Be true, remain faithful. Patrick Bonhoeffer, an American, a German pastor who was hung by the Nazis, gave us, lived the life of faithfulness to Christ.

He said, when Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. Faithfulness to Jesus in life and death. Faithfulness to Jesus even when we're sad and lonely and broken.

Faithfulness to Jesus in the midst of struggle and suffering. Faithfulness to Jesus when you're in a dark tunnel with no light at either end. In these circumstances, Jesus is not condemning you, but he's saying stay true and live a life of power that will challenge this world.

So what do we say then in response to that? What do we say in response to the Jesus who says stay true to me in life and in death and darkness and in suffering and brokenness and pain and fear and doubt?

[31 : 30] Stay true. What do we say to this Jesus? Well, there's only one thing I can say to Jesus in these circumstances, which is this. I can't.

I can't stay true to you, Jesus. It's beyond me in my own strength because often we are broken by life.

There is no glibness about these things. Jesus isn't sort of saying, you know, just sort of, you know, I know it's tough, but you're tough.

Get on with it. Jesus says, I know you can't do it as well. I know your afflictions.

I know how hard it is for you. But what Jesus says is this. He says, but I've done it for you. I stayed true in the dark times for you.

[32 : 31] I was persecuted for you. I was arrested and tortured for you. I rose to eternal life for you. I did all of this for you because I know you couldn't do it for yourself.

That's the gospel. He's done it for you because you can't do it for yourself. But now he says, you can do it through me.

Because I've done it for you, because of the power of the new life that I can give you as a result of my obedience and sacrifice. You can do it through me.

You can't live this life. There is no way you can live this life in your own strength. The only way to live this life is in the power of the gospel, the power of the risen Christ in you.

And so your life must be rooted fully and completely in the risen Jesus. So here we have a great Savior, surely. He doesn't stand outside our sufferings and say, it's easy, get on with it.

[33 : 43] Quit moaning, what's the problem? He says, no, I understand the problem. And I understand the darkness and the grief and the suffering and the pain. I know what it's like and I went there for you and I'm in there with you.

We're told in Scripture, of course, that he was rich, but he became poor so that way through his poverty might be made rich. That's grace, isn't it?

Christ puts himself through the pain, the darkness, the suffering, the poverty for your sake so that you and him will find grace to live a new kind of life.

So that you and him will find power to live a new life for his glory. And what I want to say to my own heart and to your heart tonight is this, that that is the Jesus who is worth worshiping this evening.

And that when we see this Christ before us, surely we have to say he's worth living for and dying for. And that this Jesus is someone that I should love and adore with all my heart.

[34 : 57] Because what we have is this great vision of glory. And then what we're told is that this great King of glory enter darkness and grief and suffering for us.

And that is the love of God. So if you're in pain and sorrow and darkness and grief, if you're suffering, take your grief to Jesus and find the power of his life and his grace to endure.

If you're a Christian, I want to say to you, rise to the challenge. Live a life that is worthy of Christ, that counts for something, that challenges people and that makes a difference.

Live the kind of life that people would want to kill you for it, because it speaks so powerfully of Christ. Take up your cross for Jesus.

And if you're not a Christian, I want to say to you, this Jesus is worth loving and worth trusting. I'm going to say a short prayer. We're going to sing a song and then we'll be done.

[36 : 13] So Father in heaven, we pray that you would help us to hear the word of the gospel this evening. That we wouldn't think that we have life sorted, because that's just the beginning of a disaster.

But that we would see that we are incapable of being sorted. And that instead what we need is a gospel of grace and a saviour.

The power of whose life flows within us. Give us this life we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.