

**“Suffering for Christ”**  
**Revelation 2:8-11**  
**September 14, 2008**  
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**Text Comment**

- v.8 This letter begins as do the other six with an address to the angel of the church and an identification of Christ taken from the vision of chapter 1. It is then followed by the Lord’s statement that he *knows* the church and its circumstances.
- v.9 We read in a number of places in Paul’s letters of a similar distinction between true and false Judaism, the true and false sons of Israel, or Israel after the flesh and Israel after the spirit. And it was Jesus himself, you remember, in John 8 who accused his Jewish contemporaries of being children of the Devil. John is equally unforgiving. By persecuting the followers of the Messiah and by refusing to recognize Jesus as Lord and Savior the Jews in other words had forfeited all right to be called the people of God. In our relativist and tolerant age such language is particularly bound to offend. People cannot believe that people should be so narrow-minded, so judgmental. Just remember two things: first, John was himself a Jew, as was Jesus. This is an argument between Jews about what true Judaism is and does; and, second, remember that this same distinction between true and false sons is also made by Christians about Christians. In the nature of the case, some are faithful to the nature and calling of a people, a community, and others are not. We have the same arguments about true and false Americans or true and false Democrats or Republicans.

In any case these Jews were slandering the Christians, saying things about them that were not true but were likely to provoke a reaction among the townspeople if not the government.

- v.10 The “ten days” is probably an allusion to Daniel 1:12-15 where, you remember, Daniel and his friends were tested for ten days. Those young men were likewise being tempted to compromise with the pagan religion and government around them but they refused, passed the test that was given them, and were promoted to high privilege. Here is another of the symbolic periods of time we will encounter in the book of Revelation. Ten is, like seven, a number symbolic of completeness and so here the phrase seems to suggest a limited but sharp period of persecution. [Osborne, 134] It will be difficult for the believers but the Lord will ensure that it is not more than they can bear.
- v.11 Remember each letter concludes with a promise to those who are faithful that they will inherit eternal life. The “crown of life” is another metaphor of eternal life. The second death is spiritual death, condemnation, and judgment in the world to come. The death of the body in this world is the first death; the existence of the soul in a condition of alienation from God and suffering his judgment in the world to come is the second death. Death in the Bible is never extinction, never the end of a person’s existence; it is always a condition of that existence. Life and death are the two ways of existing as a human being.

Smyrna was a seaport lying a little to the north of Ephesus on the Aegean coast. It was celebrated in the ancient world as a particularly beautiful city. Nothing is known of the founding of her Christian church though we know that some years later her bishop was the celebrated Polycarp who would be martyred for his faith in the middle years of the second century. The letter to Smyrna follows the pattern of the other letters except in this: there is no criticism, no rebuke, and no call to repentance. For this church John has unqualified praise.

It does not appear that there has been as yet any official action taken against the church by the Roman government. It is unlikely that anyone had yet died for his or her faith; that measure of suffering lay yet over the horizon. But verse 9 seems clearly to indicate both that the Christians there had suffered directly for their faith and that they had suffered financial loss in particular. This could have come through mob looting or through the confiscation of property by the local government or simply from the difficulty of making a living in a society that regarded you with contempt and resentment because of your faith. A Christian couldn't work in any trade associated with the temples and idolatry of the city – a substantial part of its economy of course – some of the other guilds required oaths a Christian could not swear, and no self-respecting Jew would hire a Christian. So they suffered a general alienation from the community and this inevitably had an economic consequence.

Much of this resentment toward them came originally from and continued to be fostered by the Jews. Their animosity was due to two facts: 1) in all likelihood the first Christians of the town and probably still a substantial portion of the Christian church in Smyrna had been defectors from the synagogue; that always stings; and 2) the claim of the Christians was precisely that the Messiah had come and the Jews had rejected him, a galling accusation to Jews then as now. We know from elsewhere in the NT that the Jews in Roman cities informed on Christians to the local government and stirred up opposition against them by representing them as seditious; in other words as bad citizens, as harmful to the body politic. They were said to be, by the Jews in their day, as Hitler would later describe the committed Christians of Germany in his day, a pox among the citizenry.

But John tells them that if this is bad worse is coming and that they must prepare themselves for arrest and even for the threat of death. To steel and nerve them he reminds them that it will be no one less than the Devil himself who will stand behind their persecution and orchestrate it when it comes, whether employing the natural resentment of the Jews or the Romans' eagerness to impose a uniformity of religious devotion to the state. Either way it will be the Devil who is doing it. If Christians know it is the Devil who is after them, if they see the Jews and the Romans as simply his pawns, they will not be beguiled so easily by the temptation to submit and to conform as a way to make life easier for themselves. They will see it for what it is: a test of the integrity of their faith and their loyalty to Jesus.

When Polycarp was hauled before the Roman governor Statius Quadratus in A.D. 155, about a half century later, he found the governor quite ready to allow him to save his life by making what the governor deemed a trivial concession. "Offer a pinch of incense before the emperor's statue," he said "Or take some oath by the fortune of Caesar." Just say a few words, you don't even have to mean them, and you can walk out a free man. Just prove yourself a good citizen. The

temptation was all the stronger because Christians *were* good citizens. Their unwillingness to worship the emperor or swear a vow of loyalty to him as a god in no way meant they were not good and loyal citizens. But Polycarp had no difficulty seeing right through to the spiritual nature and challenge of the governor's offer. It was a test of his faith, the Devil was behind it, and so he refused.

Don't imagine that this describes some ancient situation that has little or no bearing on our Christian life today. In the state of Orissa in India, as we speak this very morning, Christians are being faced with precisely this same temptation. Over the past several weeks, the *New York Times* reports, more than 1600 Christian homes have been destroyed or damaged by fire, more than 80 churches burned and at least 25 Christians have been killed by Hindu mobs targeting them *as Christians*. This was a report as of some days ago; more suffering has occurred in the last few days. Several orphanages have also been destroyed. The Hindus resent the Christians in part because their missionaries succeed in attracting Hindus to the Christian faith – these are Indian missionaries, not westerners – and because the Christians, through schooling and other means, are providing hope for the future to the lowest castes of Hindu society. Their work, in other words is very good for Indians and for India. They are the very best kind of citizens and they are citizens who work for the welfare of everyone. But the Hindu nationalists don't think so.

The Hindu mobs employ precisely the same threat that would be faced in Smyrna in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century: convert or die. And, to be sure, some convert out of fear for themselves or their families. One man interviewed by the *New York Times* reporter who with his family was chased by armed Hindus into the forest was ordered to convert to Hinduism or die. "My children and wife were all crying in fear so I agreed to take part in the ritual," he said.

Also in the mid-second century in Smyrna some were not faithful to the point of death. In the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, the account of their bishop's death written by the church in Smyrna shortly after the event, we read of one Quintus, a Christian, who lost his nerve when he saw the wild beasts. To be thrown to the beasts was one of the three principal means of execution in the Roman world of that time. Quintus was told by the proconsul, the Roman judge, to take the oath and offer sacrifice to the Roman gods or else and so he took the oath and he offered the sacrifices.

But many Christians in Orissa have not and will not convert even at the point of death. Included in the *Times* report is this:

"I am afraid and will not go back to my village," said Ms. Nayak, 25, [I love that *New York Times* touch, "Ms", as if the Indian Christian women of Orissa State are New York City feminists!] who took shelter in a crowded relief camp in Raikia. She is among an estimated 13,500 people who have fled to refugee camps, according to Krishna Kumar, the top state official in Kandhamal. Ms. Nayak says that her husband, Bikram, was fatally wounded while she hid and that her house was destroyed.

In Tiangia, Mr. Nayak's motorcycle lay burned outside his badly damaged home. Mr. Nayak, 30, a government kerosene salesman, died from head wounds after being severely beaten by the mob, his wife said.

Ms. Nayak said her faith remained unshaken. “My husband died for Christ,” she said. “I was born a Christian and I will die a Christian.” [NT Times, Online Ed. Sept 3]

You can hear in Mrs. Nayak’s voice the same steel, the same inflexible loyalty to Christ that nerved the 84 year old Polycarp who told his judge when told to curse Christ or die:

“Eighty-six years I have served him, and he never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me? ... I am a Christian.”

And when the judge threatened him: “I shall have you consumed with fire...unless you change your mind,” Polycarp replied,

“The fire you threaten burns but an hour and is quenched... [but] you do not know the fire of the coming judgment and everlasting punishment that is laid up for the unbelieving...”

And so the proconsul gave up and sent his herald into the arena to proclaim three times, as was the procedure (state persecution is always accompanied by a punctilious observance of correct procedure), to the assembled citizens: “Polycarp has confessed himself to be a Christian.” And so the crowd – Jews and Gentiles alike – clamored for his death and he was burned to death before them. This ancient letter, *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, comes to us white hot out of the life experience of real people in the real world and I very much hope someone has provided copies to the saints in Orissa today. Who better to read its account and be helped by it?

But, remember, the conclusion of the letter in v. 11 reminds us that this letter was written for us as well. That was understood from the beginning. The writer of the late second century Muratorian Fragment, an early and unfortunately incomplete list of the books of the New Testament, says “...John, though he writes to seven churches, yet speaks to all.” Verse 11 virtually repeats the words the Lord himself spoke when speaking of the future and his Second Coming again. “What I say to you, I say to everyone.” [Mark 13:36] The situation the letter to Smyrna addresses, however specific to that church in the last years of the first century, is *our situation* too necessary changes being made. It addresses us because it is always possible that greater suffering for Christ is in *our* future as it was in theirs. Political changes can come very quickly and dramatically as we now know and the position of Christians who are unwilling to bow to the social and religious orthodoxies of their day can very quickly become first tenuous and then dangerous. I suppose most all of us have wondered if we might at some point face the do or die challenge of loyalty to Christ and how we would do in that moment.

But more than that, the call to suffer for Christ, even to die for him is to be answered by every Christian, whether or not he or she is ever actually called upon to be faithful to the point of physical death. *In Revelation as we shall see the martyrs are a synecdoche for all Christians, a part for the whole*, a representative community that stands for the entire church. And there is a very natural reason for that. Every Christian is called to suffer for his or her faith. Paul said that through many afflictions we must inherit the kingdom of God and, in another place, promised that if a man or woman were determined to live a godly life he or she needed to prepare for opposition and persecution. The world will always be offended by people whose lives and whose

beliefs are an open rebuke to their own. Jesus said that anyone who wished to be his disciple would have to be willing to take up his cross and follow him. Well the cross was an instrument of death. The Christian life, in other words, is a form of martyrdom; Paul even speaks of dying daily (1 Cor. 15:31) as a way of describing a faithful Christian life of godliness and service. We die to ourselves, we die to the world, we die to sinful desires, we die to ease and comfort in order to live for Christ and his kingdom. We are actively to seek, as Paul says, the fellowship of Christ's sufferings because in a world of sin and death, in a world that is opposed to the reign of the Lord Jesus Christ, everything good, everything holy, everything eternally valuable is going to come at a price.

Even the world knows that affliction, persecution, and sorrow are often the source of the best and most beautiful things. Without imprisonment perhaps Cervantes would never have written *Don Quixote* nor would John Bunyan have written *Pilgrim's Progress*. Without the tragedy of his imprisonment and exile Solzhenitsyn would never have given the world his *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* or his monumental *Gulag Archipelago*. Without his blindness Milton would perhaps never have given the world his *Paradise Lost* or, had he still written his epic poem, not so great a *Paradise Lost* and without his deafness what would have become of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*? Without war we would not have some of the greatest acts of human heroism; without disability, illness, and trial where would the greatest acts of love, sympathy and friendship be found, and so on.

What is more, suffering humbles man as nothing else can and opens his heart to a wiser view both of himself and others. Malcolm Muggeridge goes so far as to say that without suffering human life would be intolerable.

“Suppose you eliminated suffering, what a dreadful place the world would be! ...because everything that corrects the tendency of...man to feel over-important and over-pleased with himself would disappear. He's bad enough now, but he would be absolutely intolerable if he never suffered.” [Cited by Brian Moore, in *Pulpit and People*, 147]

But however true this may be as a general principle of human life, it is all the more true as a principle of the spiritual life of God's people. Our salvation came to us; our life comes to us through the suffering of the Son of God. His conquest of sin and death was a work of terrible pain and loss. And in a similar way the Christian life, a life designed and which desires to accomplish Christ's will in ourselves and in the world, contains suffering as an essential characteristic. We have an adversary who opposes us and to the extent that we are serving the Lord and seeking to honor him, he will make things difficult for us. The remnants of our own native sinfulness ensure that we will always have work to do that is painful and wearying. As Alexander Fairbairn put it when speaking of the self-denying, humbling, sin-killing work to which every Christian is called everyday of his or her life: “Some live by the sweat of the brow, and some by the sweat of the brain, and some by the sweat of the heart, and that, you know, is the hardest sweat of all.” [In Gammie, *Preachers I Have Heard*, 28] Every true Christian must live by the sweat of the heart, so much hard, self-denying work, so much loss; so much self-sacrifice must be experienced inside of us!

No one can live the Christian life at ease, no one ever has. The adversary won't let you and neither will the world. The Christian faith *is* an alien faith. We are not as our neighbors in fundamental ways. *We are* to be infidels when it comes to the religious and social commitments of so many around us. In a world that worships money and pleasure we are to remain blasphemers.

These Christian folk in Smyrna didn't have fine houses or, if some of them had had them, they had been taken away. For some of them a life of ease and comfort had been theirs and they had lost it when they made their commitment to follow Jesus Christ. They didn't have large bank accounts or the influence that goes along with wealth. They didn't eat the best food or drink the best wine. They were not as able to provide the finest for their children as many of their neighbors. *And, what is more, it was their Christian faith that stood in the way.* If they would only be willing to give it up, or even keep it but make some compromises with their pagan society, they could have better jobs, no one would seize their property, and the fear of still worse persecution would disappear. They lived in want and in uncertainty for one reason and one reason only *because they were followers of Jesus Christ.*

But because they were Christians they were in fact rich, as the Lord reminds them here; far richer in fact than their wealthiest neighbors. When these believers counted up what they did have they saw immediately that the Lord was right. They *were* rich! They were filthy rich. Let's see: they had one another in the body of Christ, a community, a family of love; they had the living God as their Heavenly Father; they had the Holy Spirit of God with them and within them bringing joy and peace to their hearts; they had an impossibly high purpose for living; they had the righteousness of Christ in which to stand before God at the Last Judgment; they had the promise of everlasting life in a world of measureless joy; they had the promise of God's presence with them at every moment while they lived in this world and they had the knowledge that if they had to suffer they had to suffer for the highest and purest and the most beautiful things and they were suffering in a way they would be so glad to have suffered when it was all said and done.

Who is the rich man? The one who basks in luxury now, who seeks and spends the wealth of this world during the short years of his life here only to live without anything to gladden his heart in the eternal years to come? Or is the rich man the one who does without some things and even suffers the loss of many things – though even in this life the Lord loves to give gifts to his children – who serves the Lord Christ while he is in the world and so comes at last to possess all things forever in the world to come? The answer is obvious but it is suffering in this world – all the suffering we endure in order to be faithful Christians – that keeps that answer convincing to us and that keeps us fully aware of that eternal calculation and keeps our conscience wide awake both to the foolishness of caring too much for what we cannot keep and the wisdom of living with an eye to the world to come. Peace and prosperity knit us to this world which is why, as Samuel Rutherford put it, “Faith is the better for the free air and the sharp winter-storm in its face. Grace withers without adversity.” [*Letters*, paperback ed., 69] Jesus put the same point negatively, “It is harder for rich man to enter the kingdom of God than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle” To fulfill his Father's will in this world Christ had to suffer and we his servants are not above our master. “If they persecuted me,” Jesus said, “they will persecute you.” That is simply the nature of things in this world that is in rebellion against God. A soldier in a foxhole, when the bullets fly around him, does not turn to his fellows with a baffled look on

his face and ask with an exasperated voice, “Was it something I said? Why are they so upset with me?” He knows that the danger he faces is entirely because of the side he is on and the battle that is being waged by forces far larger than himself!

All of that makes perfect sense to a Christian, to one who believes the good news of Christ and salvation and the explanations of the Word of God, but it does not make much sense to an unbeliever. He or she is more likely to think that God should eliminate suffering, especially for his own people, the people whom he loves. Why should good people suffer? Why should evil people prosper? These are natural questions. Everyone raises them? But the questions disappear at once when we come to have the same perspective on time and eternity that Jesus did, when we view life in this world as he viewed it.

*Is there really a Devil?* Are there really spiritual adversaries who exploit the unbelief, the resentment, the jealousy, and the fears of men to seek to undermine the kingdom of God in this world? Jesus said there were demonic forces at loose in the world and he did battle with them throughout his earthly ministry. If that opposition to God in the world is a reality of human history, if this world really is a battlefield upon which is being waged a cosmic life and death struggle for power and victory, who can doubt that mankind will suffer the effects, the Christians for one reason being on one side as they are, the non-Christians for another being on another side as they are?

*Are there really such things as spiritual poverty and spiritual wealth?* Are there things much more precious than personal peace and prosperity, physical safety and acceptance in society? Of course there are. Jesus said “What does it profit a man if he gain *the whole world* but lose his soul?” When deposed by a synod of his enemies, the great preacher of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, John Chrysostom – who lived in Byzantium or Constantinople, not so many miles from Smyrna – reflected on his dangerous and difficult situation.

“A terrible storm is approaching; but we have no fear of sinking, for we are founded! What, in fact, can I have to dread? Death? Jesus Christ is my life, and death is my gain! Exile? The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof! Confiscation? We brought nothing into this world, and we can carry nothing out.” [In Bonar, *Scenes from The History of the Christian Church*, 29]

Who then is the rich man in this world if it is possible to know the living God in *this* world and to be with God forever in the *next*?

*Is there such a thing as the Word of God?* Has God ever spoken? Is there truth to be known about the present and the future? Can you *know* what your life means and where it is going? Have we some way of being sure what we are to believe and how we are to live? “These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.” Christians are Christians precisely because they have heard God speak to them – not in an audible voice but in convictions that rise unbidden in the soul and then cannot be extinguished and which God proves in many different ways to be his own word. As has often been said, when a man hears a hyena in the jungle he may think it a lion; but when he hears a lion, he knows damn well it’s a lion! So it is with the Word of God. When God speaks in the soul, the soul hears and knows. And so it was

and so it is with the revelation that John saw and reported in his book. It is the Word of God that abides forever that we are reading together this morning.

*And, then, finally, are there such things as the second death and the crown of life?* Is this life all there is? Is there nothing more? There are some who tell us it is so; but very few who believe it. It is contrary to our nature as human beings to believe that we are creatures of no meaning, here today and gone tomorrow, pieces of scrap thrown up by chance on the shores of eternity, soon to decompose, to be forgotten, our short lives – however they may have been lived – tales told by idiots, and even if full of sound and fury, signifying absolutely nothing. Human beings do not believe this. They cannot believe this. And even when they claim to believe it, they do not live as if they did. It is insupportable misery for human beings to think of themselves as nothing and their lives as meaning nothing; going nowhere and having no consequence whatsoever; like a bug among a million bugs that springs into life and is dead a few hours or days later having been eaten by some bird.

But if this life and this world are all that there is – if there is no crown of life and no second death – our lives *are* of no consequence. They mean *nothing*. It matters not how you live or how you die. A few days after your death hardly anyone will remember that you ever lived. In a few years no one will remember. And what is the point of remembering? Those who can still remember will be nothing themselves in a short while. Such a grim conception of life is unutterably depressing to human beings made as all human beings have been in the image of the living and eternal God who made us chock full of existence, of life, and of a sense of purpose and value. We were made *to live* not to die; we were made to love, to rejoice, to worship and adore, and to find the reason for our lives. There is a reason why we find the world something very different than the altogether bleak and pitiless place it must be if our existence is an accident and means nothing at all.

Jesus said to his disciples not only that he was going ahead of them to heaven to prepare a place for them so that where he was they could be also, but he said *that if that were not so he would have told them*. The Bible is resolutely, relentlessly honest about this: if there is no heaven, if there is no crown of life, if there is no second death that can be avoided only by faith in Jesus Christ the Son of God who lived and died for us to grant us peace with God and eternal life, then the Christian faith is nothing and of no consequence and men and women and the entire world would be better off without it. We care to know *what is true*, not what is comforting. The logic is irresistible. If these things are true, and they *are* true, then Christians should be willing, more than willing, to suffer anything for Christ and the crown of life.

It is precisely because there *is* a Devil, because there *are* such things as spiritual poverty and spiritual wealth, because there *is* the Word of God that stands forever, and because there *are* the crown of life and the second death that Christians are willing, have always been willing to suffer *even to the point of death* if only they might prove themselves loyal and faithful to Jesus Christ, who died and came to life again *for them*.

So our dear sister, young Mrs. Nayak, in Orissa, says, “My husband died for Christ; I am a Christian and I will die a Christian.” And Archibald Campbell, the Scottish Covenanter, writing to his daughter-in-law on the day of his execution for his Christian faith, wrote:

“What shall I say in this great day of the Lord, wherein in the midst of a cloud, I have found a fair sunshine. I can wish no more for you, but that the Lord may comfort you, and shine upon you as He does upon me, and give you that same sense of His love in staying in the world, as I have in going out of it.”

There is a crown of life and there is truth from him and about him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.