

Fear unto Death vs. Courage unto Life

“*Don’t be afraid.*” You know as well as I do that this isn’t as easy as it sounds, and that’s when there’s only a **possibility** that something bad might happen. What about when there’s no doubt; **when suffering isn’t a mere possibility, but absolute certainty?** “*Don’t be afraid.*” Yeah... I wish it were that easy. For Christians living during the time that Revelation was written, the threat of suffering for the faithful was very real. If you were public in your faith (or even suspected of being a Christian), you could almost certainly expect to suffer. No one was immune either. Think of what happened to St. John and all the other apostles. With these words, our Lord is telling the Christians of Smyrna in unvarnished terms, “*This is what’s in store for you too.*” You can’t help but hear your Lord’s words elsewhere when He says to His disciples, “*If this is how they treat Me, then don’t expect to be treated any different/better.*”

Before we jump in, though, let’s provide a little background/context concerning the recipients of this letter. The city of Smyrna (modern-day Izmir, Turkey), located on the coast of the Aegean Sea, with its beautiful mountains and bright, crystal-clear teal-colored water [picture the Caribbean], about 40 miles north of Ephesus) was known as a “beautiful crown.” The Romans referred to Smyrna as “*the lovely, the crown of Ionia, the ornament of Asia.*” Yet all those attributes that inspired this name were of little value... **not in the eyes of the Lord, at least.**

The “crown” reference is important as it brings to mind the religious character of the people here. The citizens of Smyrna were **very devout** in their religious beliefs/practices... **but not to the God who made heaven and earth.** No, the citizens of Smyrna were **devoted to the state; i.e., the Roman Empire**, which to the residents of Smyrna had become its god in the truest sense of the word. In fact, Smyrna was the very first city in the Roman Empire to build a temple dedicated to the goddess Rome. They also built temples dedicated to Emperor Tiberius as well as to his mom, Livia (who played a large role in running the empire too, even taking the title “Augusta”). The devout citizens of Smyrna had even built a temple to the Roman Senate! You heard me right! **They worshiped the senate as gods!** It’s bad enough when politicians believe they’re gods, but to reinforce such arrogance by worshiping them as gods?! And let’s be clear: The people of Smyrna didn’t **actually** believe that the senators were gods. They were just sucking up, doing whatever it took to curry favor with the current masters of the world. And it worked too. There’s nothing new under the sun, especially when it comes to the sliminess of politics. In exchange for all the praise and glory and worship Smyrna gave to the powers-that-be, Rome rewarded Smyrna with the finest, most beautiful city, including a magnificent library, theater, and stadium. For the average citizen of Smyrna, life was sweet... **except if you were a faithful Christian.**

You see, faithful Christians of Smyrna had very little in common with their neighbors, who enjoyed all the finest the Roman Empire had to offer. Their refusal to worship those pitiful idols and false gods made them huge targets. If it was discovered that you were a Christian, friends, neighbors, even relatives no longer wanted anything to do with you, *socially or economically*. **You were hated.** No one would do business with you, or even help you out if you were struggling. Christians in Smyrna found themselves living in abject poverty and squalor. To be clear, the pagans and the Jews of Smyrna hated each other... *but they hated Christ even more*, which means they had no problem in setting aside their differences and coming together to persecute Christians. “*The enemy of my enemy is my friend.*” Even before any of the suffering Jesus was warning about would happen, the Christians of Smyrna were *already* suffering. By 95 AD, it was already not uncommon at all for a Christian to be arrested or for a key Christian leader to be flogged and imprisoned. It was already bad... but it was going to get worse... *way worse.*

I’m reminded of the Bishop and head pastor of Smyrna (Polycarp), who was over the Smyrna Christians until **February 23, 155 AD** (1871 years ago, almost to the date). Polycarp had been a disciple of the apostle John himself. He had learned from one of the best. By the time 155 AD rolls around, Pastor Polycarp was 86 years old. All that suffering that Christians had to endure in Smyrna? ***Polycarp lived it—boldly and unashamedly—for 86 years.*** Both history and tradition tell us that Polycarp was arrested by the Roman state for simply standing firm in the faith, preaching and teaching the Truth. The people of Smyrna—Jew and Roman pagan alike—would not tolerate it. Standing before the Roman proconsul, they demanded he recant. They demanded he renounce Christ and confess Caesar is God/Lord. ***He refused.*** Threatened with death by burning at the stake, he simply looked to the crowd and stated, “***Eighty-six years I have served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?***” With that, Polycarp was promptly marched to the beautiful government-subsidized coliseum full of ravenous people—Jew and pagan alike—all excited to see him tied to a stake, stabbed repeatedly, and then set afire. Joke’s on them though. Polycarp died unafraid, singing hymns and praying for his persecutors.

Here’s where I’m going with all this. Polycarp (and the faithful Christians who would follow him) were unafraid... even though they suffered; ***even as they suffered.*** They trusted confidently and supremely in their Lord. The persecutions didn’t quit. In fact, they ramped up over the centuries, sometimes even coming from within; i.e., from those who claimed to be “good Christians,” but who were instead purveyors of heresy; e.g., guys like Marcion, who taught that the God of the Old Testament had nothing in common with Jesus. They weren’t the same God, and the angry, vengeful God of the Old Testament was no more. It’s amazing how Marcion and his followers so closely resembled the murderous pagans and venomous Jews when it came to responding to the Christian Truth. ***And yet... the faithful remained true to their Lord, unafraid and unashamed.***

And then there's us. Are things tough for Christians nowadays? Yes... but not so much in our own daily lives; certainly not anything close to Polycarp's level, right? ***We've got it pretty good!*** Yes, there are Christians around the world being put to death for the faith. They go to their deaths ***faithfully and fearlessly***. Us? Not so much. Sadly, many a pastor proves cowardly when things heat up, simply out of a fear of offending someone (especially a big giver) or losing a little money in their paycheck. Abortion? Homosexuality? The demonic delusion of transgenderism? The Truth of God's Word is not proclaimed for fear of losing 501c3 status. ***Heaven-forbid we lose our tax-exemption!*** I've personally been threatened with it here for preaching about something "political" like abortion... and that was from someone who fancied themselves a bold champion of the faith. ***Do not be deceived. The gods of government are still worshiped over the God of Scripture.*** Many a Christian remains silent in the face of sinful foolishness for fear of being thought a racist, a sexist, a bigot, or outdated. A snarky comment on Facebook is about the worst we have to fear (but sadly, fear we do). Many a "bold martyr of the faith" condones all kinds of sinfulness in their lives, cowardly hiding behind the lie of "*I personally believe this, but....*" They're more afraid of using the wrong pronoun with a mentally-ill person than they are of their God and Lord. They go along with the sinful delusions, but, hey, at least no one's feelings were hurt!

So, no, things aren't really all that bad for us Christians in our little neck of the kingdom. And yet... that doesn't mean that this will ***always*** be the case. But this is looking at things strictly from the perspective of bloodshed and martyrdom. ***Anyone here remember COVID?*** Remember how those who thought themselves gods declared that all churches should lock the doors and cease coming into the presence of their Lord? Remember how many "brave martyrs of the faith" immediately tucked their tail in ***reverential fear and obedience to and worship of their governmental lords***, joining forces with the mob to condemn anyone who chose to worship in person? Some faithful Christians went to jail for simply going to worship, turned in by their own fellow parishioners via "tip-off hotlines." Needless to say, there was a lot of fear and anger. There still is. ***The fear, the anger, the violence and hatred... things haven't gotten better.*** They've only gotten worse, and who knows if it will ever get better in our lifetime?

But it's to all this that our Lord still says, "*Don't be afraid.*" And ***why*** should we not fear, ***not now and not ever?*** Answer: "*I the First and the Last, who died and came to life again*" (Revelation 2:8). Jesus has the last word. He who was crucified now lives, and Christians have been baptized into Him—His death and resurrection, which means every earthly problem the Christian faces now (and will face in the future) is only temporary, a mere moment in time not worth comparing to the eternal glory already prepared for them. This is why Jesus says that the persecution will last only ten days. ***Does He mean a literal ten twenty-four-hour days?*** No, that's not at all what our Lord is saying. "***Ten***" symbolizes ***completeness/totality; e.g., Ten Commandments.*** Ten days simply means there is a limit. When the testing is complete, the suffering will end. For some, that will be

the day you die in faith, as it was for St. Polycarp. For others, it will be when that time of suffering has run its course, and you can live out your years peacefully. Whatever the case, make no mistake—the suffering and persecution *will* end. That is a promise from Jesus, and like I said, He has the final word.

“Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me” (Psalm 23:4). How can you fear the valley if your Savior has trod its path ahead of you and returns to carry you safely through it? ***Fear is what happens when your gaze dwells on your circumstances rather than on your Lord.*** Think of “bold” Peter walking on water. The moment he began to sink is when he took his eyes off his Lord, focusing instead on the wind and waves. Lift up your heads from all these things that frighten you and rest your gaze on the King of glory! Do not set your minds on the things below, but on the things above. As you do, you will find your heart encouraged to keep going, to stay in the race and finish it. Then you will receive the ***promised crown of life***; the living laurel placed upon the head of one who has run the marathon and finished the race.

And you *will* finish because Jesus has run the race for you and won. He is with you every step of the way. He is there at the end of the course, calling you. The Holy Spirit dwells within you, making you a holy temple for Christ, ***caring for you, lifting you up when you falter and stumble and grow weary.*** The crown of life eternal is yours even now as you receive it by means of faith, as Word and Sacrament keep it before your eyes. If this is the prize of your heart, the prize for which you yearn, every resource of God’s grace will empower you to run the race and receive it.

In the meantime, as you run this race, ***do not be surprised or afraid of the fact that suffering lies ahead.*** You may not suffer like Polycarp, but you *will* suffer. And when you do, know this: Your Savior understands your suffering. One day you will see for yourself that **it wasn’t in vain.** Until then, keep the eyes of your faith on the crown Jesus promises, knowing that *“He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death”* (Revelation 2:11). Remember, you are never alone. *“I am with you always, to the end of the age.”* King David understood. *“The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom/what shall I fear?”*

AMEN