

## **Revelation 2:8-11 (1984 NIV)**

### **The Church in Smyrna: Standing Firm in Trials**

#### **Introduction**

Our text today takes us to the Church in Smyrna.

- This city was about 40 miles north of Ephesus, and was exceptionally large and beautiful.
- It was an important seaport and learning centre, particularly in the study of science and medicine.
- Politically, Smyrna had often tried to be on the good side of Rome, and hence, was given the privilege of self-government by the Romans.
- Biblical historians documented that Smyrna became a centre of emperor worship in AD 23 when the temple in honour of Emperor Tiberius was built there.
- It was much later when Emperor Domitian, who was ruling at the time Revelation was written, made emperor worship compulsory for every Roman citizen on threat of death.

With so much going on for the city of Smyrna, one would expect the Church in Smyrna to be equally vibrant.

- But the church would be more aptly described as a “suffering church”.
- This is because most Christians there rejected emperor worship, and thus, were labelled as “subversive” by the Roman regime.
- There was also a large and hostile Jewish community in Smyrna who regarded Christians as heretics of the Jewish faith, and would go all out to slander them at every opportunity (see Rev. 2:9).

Yes, the Church in Smyrna was a suffering church because it was tough going for them during that period of time.

- But the Church in Smyrna was not a suffering church because the people were fighting among themselves; if it was so, then the church would rightly deserve to suffer.
- The church was suffering because the people were making a stand for Jesus; they were suffering for Jesus’ sake.
- This is one church that earned no condemnation or disapproval from the Lord in His letter to them.
- This church might be lacking in physical, human, and financial resources; but it more than made up for these shortfalls with one spiritual resolution—i.e. remaining faithful to the Lord and keeping faith in Him when the going gets tough.

Now, is there anything that the Church in Smyrna can teach us today?

- Unlike this early church, we here are not persecuted as a church because we refuse to subscribe to emperor worship.
- But that doesn't mean there are no tough times ahead of us in view of the many conflicts and uncertainties in the world today—geopolitically, socioeconomically, and environmentally.
- In turn, these global conflicts and uncertainties will affect and test our commitment to concerns in or out of the church—our physical, human, and financial resources and resilience are likely to be stretched and tested.
- These are times when global, regional, and even domestic conditions are so uncertain and volatile that no one can be too definitive of the shape of events to come—it is kind of “wait and see, and keep our fingers crossed”.

I believe that it is in such times that the Lord is calling us today to revive the same spiritual resolution of the Church in Smyrna—i.e. remaining faithful to the Lord and keeping faith in Him when the going gets tough. At the same time, I believe the Lord is also declaring to us some good news like what He did to the Church in Smyrna.

What are these good news?

**I. The first good news is that the Lord is still in control in tough times (vv. 8-9)**

8 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 yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

To the suffering Church in Smyrna, the Lord reminded them in v. 8 that He is “the First and the Last, who died and came to life again”. What does it mean for the Lord to be “the First and the Last”?

- In Isa. 44:6 and 48:12, the title “the First and the Last” applies to God Himself.
- Thus, the Lord Jesus is here identified with God and as God.
- Not only that, the title also stresses that Jesus is the absolute Lord of all events in history, implying that Jesus is in control even in the midst of all the appearances of evil.
- Smyrna as a city was constantly pushing itself to be “first” in everything in Asia as it tried to overtake other leading cities—i.e. to be first in beauty, in trade, in wealth, and in emperor loyalty.
- But the Lord reminded the Christians there who was truly first in everything—it is the Lord Himself who’s “the First and the Last”.

Our response as Christians today is also to acknowledge that the Lord is truly first in everything, and we are to be concerned with giving Him that rightful first place in everything in our lives.

- For the Lord’s people going through tough times like those in Smyrna, to know that the Lord is “the First and the Last” must truly be tremendous comfort and encouragement.

- The Lord is “the First and the Last”.
- The Lord sees the whole of history.
- The Lord is in control from beginning to end.
- Our response then is to remain faithful to the Lord and keep faith in Him from start to finish.

Not only did the Lord remind the Christians in Smyrna that He’s “the First and the Last”, but also He’s the one “who died and came to life”. What does this mean?

- Without doubt, it points to Jesus’ victory over death.
- To a congregation of believers who were facing imprisonment and death as very real possibilities, this saying of Jesus must have truly boosted their courage and morale.
- To suffer and die physically for the Lord’s sake was no foolish act, no hopeless situation, no tragic ending, and no defeated cause. Why?
- This is because Jesus did rise and come to life again—He had defeated physical death, and thus, when we stand with Him as we go through suffering in tough times, we stand on the winning side.

Testimony: I recall a time when a good friend suffered great financial losses resulting from his heavy investments in foreign currencies when the Gulf War broke out in 1991.

But he qualified that he suffered not for Christ’s sake, but for covetousness’ sake. The Lord used this tough time in his life to turn him around; to give the Lord the rightful first place in his life. This friend had learnt to put Christ first before currencies.

Some years later in 1998, another major crisis hit Asia—the Asian financial crisis. I met this friend one day during this troubled period, and he told me in a humble and sober manner that this present crisis had actually resulted in him making some good gains because of some long-term, wise, and prudent investments. But this time, all without him working feverishly to make quick profits like what he tried to do in 1991.

Looking back at his huge losses in 1991, he said that it was as if the Lord was teaching him this lesson—when you stand away from the Lord in your seemingly good times, you stand on the losing side; but when you stand with the Lord even as you go through seemingly tough times, you stand on the winning side.

- Jesus reminded the believers in Smyrna that He “died and came to life”, indicating not only His victory over death, but also stressing that He is living and present among them.
  - When you attend a wake, you find that the bereaved family often break down in tears when they look at the body of the deceased.
  - Why? This is because the dead body offers no comfort even though it is in full view—the bereaved family are not reminded of how close the deceased is before them, but how far he/she has gone.

- In fact, it is the presence of others, e.g. relatives, friends, and even strangers that helps the bereaved family to sense some measure of comfort and strength.
- Why? This is because these are not people who are merely present, but they are also living persons coming into the life and situation of the bereaved at their time of need.
- This is why Jesus' reminder that He's the one who "died and came to life again" is of such great comfort to those who are going through tough times.
- To the believers in Smyrna who faced great suffering, the Lord reassured them that He's not a corpse who could not empathise and sympathise with them.
  - Instead, He reminded them that He's the living Lord who could empathise and sympathise with their suffering because He had gone through suffering Himself, and He was present with them to help them through.
- The Lord is also telling us today that He is living and present with us and among us to help us through our tough times.

The Lord is still in control in our tough times today, and His control stems from His perfect and complete knowledge of our situation—He told the believers in Smyrna in v.9 that He knew of "your afflictions and your poverty".

- The word "affliction" carries the idea of "a crushing pressure"—imagine a man being tortured to death by being slowly crushed by a huge and heavy boulder laid on him.
- Torture and death was indeed a real and frequent danger besetting the believers in Smyrna.
- They suffered not because the Lord was displeased with them, or that they had done something wrong; in fact, the Lord did not charge them with any wrong doing, or call them to repent.
- This church came under "crushing pressure" because they did the right things—they were making godly choices, and so their hostile world made them suffer for it.
- And one way in which these believers suffered for making godly choices was poverty.
  - In a successful and sufficient city like Smyrna, no one should be suffering from poverty; but the Church in Smyrna did.
  - Their predicament was not due to their disobedience, but to their loyalty to the Lord.
  - They refused to give in to the pressure to compromise with the worldly and godless ways of Smyrna city; instead, they chose to do things in Jesus' way.

How the Church in Smyrna responded to the "crushing pressure" in their time should be our example today as a church.

- When we come together and declare that we want to grow as a healthy church, pressure will come.
- When we stand up together and say that we want to be faithful in reaching out to the lost; in building up ourselves as Christ's disciples; in equipping ourselves for ministry in our land and beyond, pressure will come.

- And behind all the visible pressure we see is the invisible hostility of the devil—he would use all means to disrupt and divide the church.
- And one snare of the devil is that of financial difficulty—he uses it to pressure the Lord’s people to compromise on their commitment to Him and their unity in Him.
- This is just like what the believers in Smyrna experienced—they faced financial poverty in a thriving city of prosperity because they stood by their godly commitment and unity in rejecting emperor worship and other ungodly practices in their days.
  - They lost out financially because others were either furious with them, or fearful of being associated with them.
  - The believers in Smyrna were in poverty because of their right commitment to the Lord, and for that He blessed them with spiritual riches, including His praise and approval of them—the Lord so affirmed them in v. 9: “I know your afflictions and your poverty yet you are rich!”

We today can be poor materially either for the wrong or right reason.

- We can be poor for the wrong reason when we become unwise stewards of the resources that the Lord has blessed us with.
- We can be poor for the right reason when we stretch ourselves to give sacrificially for the sake of the Lord’s Kingdom and Christian witness.
- Let’s learn to be like the believers in Smyrna by giving sacrificially materially or otherwise for the sake of the Lord’s Kingdom and Christian witness, and as a result, experience the ever faithful sufficiency of the Lord in our lives.

The Lord reassured the believers in Smyrna that He knew of their “afflictions and poverty”, but He’s in control of their tough situation. More than that, He told them that He knew of the slander of those people who were hostile towards them in v. 9—“I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.”

- These hostile ones were Jews who regarded the Christians in Smyrna as religious rivals or heretics to be destroyed.
- But the Lord denounced them as not Jews because by their hostility against His believers in the Church in Smyrna, they demonstrated themselves as not worshippers of Yahweh, but worshippers of Satan—they belonged not to the synagogue of Yahweh, but to the synagogue of Satan.
- Since these believers also refused to worship the emperor and say “Caesar is Lord”, they became vulnerable to being slandered as disloyal subjects of the empire.

In tough times, the church would do well to guard itself not only from being slandered by people outside the church, but also from slandering campaigns against one another inside the church.

- When believers in church slander one another, they see one another as enemies rather than the devil as their common adversary.

- This suits the devil fine because when believers in church are busy slandering one another, they stop fighting the devil as their common adversary—this will result in them being disrupted and divided in the Lord’s work for them.
- In other words, the more the church wants to do the Lord’s work, the more the church needs to guard their commitment to Him and unity in Him because the greater the subversive work of the devil will be against the church.

I believe that the Lord is calling us today to revive the same spiritual resolution of the Church in Smyrna—i.e. remaining faithful to the Lord and keeping faith in Him when the going gets tough. At the same time, I believe the Lord is also declaring to us some good news like what He did to the Church in Smyrna. The first good news is that the Lord is still in control in tough times.

## **II. The second good news is that the Lord uses tough times to mould us into Christ-likeness (vv. 10-11).**

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. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. 11 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.

The Lord exhorted the believers in Smyrna not to “be afraid” in v. 10.

- Satan wanted to use the circumstances of the believers in Smyrna to tempt them away from the Lord.
- But the Lord used the same circumstances for a different purpose—He used them to test rather than to tempt.
- The Lord used imprisonment and persecution both to prove and to strengthen the faithfulness and faith of the believers in Smyrna.
- He used afflictions to purify His church then, and He still uses tough times to purify the church today.
  - When the heat is on, everyone is needed and appreciated as members of the Body of Christ.
  - Tough times keep us humble and dependent on the Lord—we discover how much we have or have not matured in Christ, and how trustworthy the Lord can be in such times.
  - In other words, tough times are used by the Lord to produce things that are of eternal value in our lives.
- Christians then and now are called to expect suffering; to be prepared and willing to learn and grow through suffering, even if they cannot fully understand their suffering.
  - When tough times are at hand, there may seem nothing much we can do, except to commend the situation to the Lord and take it one day at a time.
  - This is not resigning ourselves to fatalism, but it is exactly what the Lord is wanting us to learn during such times—i.e. be prayerfully dependent on Him and trust Him to take us through such tough times by taking us through one day at a time.

The Lord not only called the believers in Smyrna “not be afraid”, but also “be faithful, even to the point of death” in v. 10.

- And the Lord is the right person to so challenge the believers in Smyrna.
- This is because He Himself had gone that way before as He went to die on the Cross; He was not challenging them by remaining in the comfort and security of His own “ivory tower”.
- In other words, He was calling the believers to be prepared and willing to walk in His footsteps if need be.
  - They must be prepared and willing to wear the “crown of thorns” like Jesus did when He went to the Cross and suffered death on it.
  - But the Lord did not stop there—He also promised them a “crown of life”, symbolising victory over death and life in the presence of God after they had persevered through such times.
  - Life in heaven is more precious and desirable than life on earth; heavenly riches are more precious than earthly wealth; earthly losses are nothing when compared with heavenly gains—in tough times, the Lord is challenging us to check if we agree with Him on this.

The Lord is not promising us today that our days will always be sunshine and roses.

- There will be tough times ahead, and He is calling us to be prepared and willing to walk His way; to be like Him when trouble hits us hard in life.
- This means to be prepared and willing to remain faithful and keep faith in Him in our tough times—just as He Himself had remained faithful and kept faith in the Heavenly Father on His way to the Cross, and even when He was dying on it.

Illustration: Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor and anti-Nazi dissident in WW II. His writings on Christianity’s role in the secular world have become widely influential, and his 1937 book “The Cost of Discipleship” is described as a modern classic. Apart from his theological writings, Bonhoeffer was known for his staunch resistance to the Nazi dictatorship, including vocal opposition to Adolf Hitler’s euthanasia programme and genocidal persecution of Jews. He was arrested in April 1943 by the Gestapo and imprisoned for 1½ years.

Later, he was transferred to a concentration camp; accused of being associated with a plot to assassinate Hitler, and was tried along with others. He was hanged on 9 April 1945 during the collapse of the Nazi regime.

One famous quote found in his book “The Cost of Discipleship” is this—  
“When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”

Yes, tough times are often used by the Lord to test and purify us so that we learn to die to our old ways of living and to embrace the cost of

following Him; to die to our attachments to the world and surrendering to Him.<sup>1</sup>

The call to “be faithful, even to the point of death”, and the promise of the “crown of life” and “not be hurt at all by the second death” in vv. 10 & 11 all point not to the end of life, but to the beginning of a new life in communion with Christ. This is the faithfulness and faith of Christ exemplified for us on the Cross—i.e. remaining faithful and keeping faith right to the end because it is for God’s cause. And we are called to be so like Christ in tough times.

## Conclusion

We may not know for sure what the days ahead will hold for us. But we know for sure that the Lord holds all things firmly in His hands, even the days ahead. Nothing catches Him by surprise.

I believe the Lord is calling us today to revive the same spiritual resolution of the Church in Smyrna—i.e. remaining faithful to the Lord and keeping faith in Him when the going gets tough. At the same time, I believe the Lord is also declaring to us some good news like what He did to the Church in Smyrna.

- One, the good news that the Lord is still in control in tough times.
- Two, the good news that the Lord uses tough times to mould us into Christ-likeness.

A few things we can do in order to stand firm in our faithfulness to the Lord and our faith in Him in times of trials.

- Firstly, give support to and receive encouragement from one another—learn to carry one another’s burdens.
- Secondly, be forgiving, gracious, and merciful to those who have wronged us.
- Thirdly, remind ourselves that the Christian life is a marathon and not a sprint—there often is no quick and easy way out of trials; thus, we are called to take the long road of obedience.

Illustration: Wang Mingdao, the Chinese Christian leader, suffered long imprisonment after the Communists came to power in China. The cause of his death was the impact of 22 years of imprisonment, solitary confinement, torture, and interrogations.

Many of his journals and other writings are published in English. In his writings, Wang Mingdao lists six benefits of suffering.

1. Suffering presses Christians to look up to God, to depend on Him, and to come near to Him in prayer. This in turn releases innumerable blessings from God.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dietrich\\_Bonhoeffer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dietrich_Bonhoeffer).



2. Suffering helps Christians in strengthening their faith.
3. Suffering edifies and strengthens believers so that they want to leave all unrighteousness and be made holy.
4. Suffering alerts believers to the fact that this world is not our permanent home, and therefore, we need not love it too much.
5. Suffering can help Christians persevere in long obedience to the Lord, and for which we will receive an eternal reward.
6. Christians can be trained through suffering so that they can in turn comfort and help others.

(<https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/chinese-culture-and-the-ethos-of-suffering-in-the-chinese-church>)

Let's learn to remain faithful to the Lord and to keep faith in Him; standing firm in Him, for Him, and with Him in our times of trials.

Pray that the Lord will so help us hear, heed, and overcome. Amen!