

To the Church of Smyrna | Revelation 2:8-11

Have you ever wondered whether following Jesus makes life easier? Maybe some of us are asking that question these days, exploring who Jesus is and what it means to follow him in hopes he might make life easier amidst our stresses or struggles? Or perhaps you've been following Jesus for a while and have wondered the same thing, but are now wrestling with the answer to that question. Well, if you've ever wondered whether following Jesus makes life easier, today's passage from *The Book of Revelation* may speak directly to you.

Today, we're exploring the second letter to the seven churches of Revelation in chapters 2 and 3, looking at the letter to the church of Smyrna. And while this is, in fact, the *second* letter John writes on behalf of Jesus, the city of Smyrna at the time thought of themselves as *second to none*. You see, like the city of Ephesus, the city of Smyrna was located on the coast of the Aegean Sea and was in constant competition with both Ephesus and Pergamum as the first and most important city of the province of Asia. In fact, on their coins, the governors of Smyrna printed the phrase: "*First City of Asia in Size & Beauty.*" Further still, the people of Smyrna were known to recite the mantra, "*Rome: first in all things,*" as they aspired to be *first in allegiance* to Rome in order to be seen as the leading city of Asia Minor. And many would say they achieved that status when they won bids to not only be the first in Asia to build a temple to the goddess Roma, but also to be the first to build a temple to Caesar – an honour given only to the most loyal cities in the empire.

Smyrna was also known for its military might and economic resilience. Because of its desirable location, the city had been attacked and rebuilt on more than one occasion and was referred to as "*the city that died and yet lives.*" At the heart of its economy – as well as the origin of its name – was the trading of myrrh. A burial spice, that when crushed, produced incense for imperial cult worship, and could be melted and sold as an expensive perfume.

And as a result, the city of Smyrna thrived, becoming one of the wealthiest and most elegant cities of their time, known by others as “***The Crown of Asia***” because of Smyrna’s dazzling architecture stretched across a steep coastal hill shaped like a crown. Meaning life in the city of Smyrna was like living on easy street in one of the most elegant cities in the world!

Unless that is, you were a follower of Jesus... You see, followers of Jesus had pledged their allegiance to... *Jesus*. Not to Rome. Not to Caesar. Not to the Almighty Dollar. And it was starting to cost them, especially in the city of Smyrna. You see, one of the non-negotiable civic duties of a good Smyrnan citizen had become full participation in the Roman imperial rituals that helped their world – *and their economy* – go ‘round. And the defining ritual of the time, practiced annually at the temple and routinely in the marketplace, was to take a small pinch of incense – made from their national treasure, myrrh – and simply throw it on an altar while declaring, “Caesar is Lord.” A simple and seemingly mundane ritual to make clear that Smyrna was on the side of Rome – no matter what! – and that business in Smyrna would be handled in the best interests of Rome. And while the Romans didn’t care what you believed after that, vendors in the Smyrna marketplace were careful to take note of whether or not you had the mark of incense on your fingers as the sign of your allegiance to their way of life.

Now, there was one exception to participation in the imperial cult rituals though, a long-standing exception arranged by the Jewish community throughout the empire. An exception brokered by their religious leaders in cooperation with Roman authorities. That because of the wide-spread presence of the Jewish community along with their unique belief in *one God* – a belief that was unique from all other polytheistic religions and perspectives of the time – along with their willingness to then cooperate with and submit to Roman authorities, followers of Judaism had been given the formal and official exemption to not have to participate in Roman cult worship practices, including in the empire-allegiant city of Smyrna.

And at first, this was great news for the early Christians – many of whom were Jewish, as they saw Jesus as *the fulfillment* of their Jewish faith. As their long-expected Messiah who was now Lord and Saviour of all people everywhere! But not all their ethnic siblings saw it that way. And as the Jesus-movement had continued to expand and cross ethnic boundaries, some Jewish leaders – including those of the thriving synagogue in Smyrna – were not only arguing that followers of Jesus were not being true to the Jewish faith, now, they were starting to rat out Christians to the civil authorities, saying they shouldn't be exempt from the Roman practice of incense worship and the declaration that "Caesar is Lord", and should be held accountable for not complying with the Roman imperial customs of the city of Smyrna.

And by the time John, through the words of Jesus, was writing to the church in Smyrna, many of them had seen or known Christians who were experiencing severe persecution at the hands of not only the Romans but their fellow Jewish citizens. Most notably, with Jesus-followers losing their jobs or businesses, being excluded from buying and selling in the marketplace, and now putting some on them on the verge of extreme poverty, all with more writing on the wall that things were likely to only get worse before they got better.

And that's where we get Jesus' letter to the church of Smyrna. Jesus, who had very specific things he wanted to say to his followers in *this* city. Jesus, who saw what they were going through and wanted them to know he was with them in it. Jesus, who wanted to speak directly to any of them who might have thought following him was going to make life easier.

As we heard in the passage, Jesus started by saying:

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.

Jesus says: *Smyrna, first in size and beauty? Actually: I am the First and the Last.*

Smyrna, the city that died, yet lives? Actually: I'm the one who died and came to life again.

And with the authority of his *First & Last – Died & Alive* identity, Jesus then says, and I see what you're going through. Specifically, ***I know your afflictions and your poverty.***

The Greek word for “afflictions” here is the word *thlipsis*. Which, while kinda fun to say was obviously not fun to live, as it literally means: *crushing*. That like the myrrh that was crushed in Smyrna to create wealth, Jesus saw how his followers were being crushed through persecution. And while there's more than one Greek word for “poverty”, the particular word used here referred to *extreme poverty on the verge of starvation*. That Jesus-followers in Smyrna were not just finding themselves slighted or having to make small sacrifices, but for some, were beginning to face the real prospect of losing everything, potentially life itself.

Yet in the midst of Jesus' empathy for their crushing poverty, he also said something startling, saying: ***yet you are rich!*** That, while by all expectations and experiences of how life was getting harder and how their lives were being crushed, Jesus said that wasn't a sign of them getting anything wrong but actually a sign of getting following him right. That like, how the crushing of myrrh could produce expensive perfume, the crushing they were experiencing was also producing something – producing a wealth of faith in what it meant to follow Jesus.

Jesus then contrasted this version of faithfulness to him even further with some intense words to describe those who were making life most difficult for his followers in Smyrna.

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

Now, obviously this comes off as a pretty harsh description of the Jewish community who, at the time, were ratting out the Jesus-followers in Smyrna – many of whom were Jewish as well. But here's also an opportunity to begin to understand some of what can be the challenging imagery or intense language we'll encounter throughout *The Book of Revelation*, in this case by unpacking a phrase like: *synagogue of Satan*.

So let me offer a few thoughts on *Satan* (a sentence you probably didn't expect to hear this morning)... In the Hebrew and Greek of the Bible, the word "Satan" is not a proper name, but a generic noun serving as a title or description of the source of evil in the world – most often written as *The Satan* – and literally meaning, "The Adversary" or "The Accuser." So, while the concept of Satan in the Bible *doesn't* refer to some specific being wearing red tights and holding a pitchfork, the Scriptures *are clear* that there is an active spirit and enemy of God at work in the world. Which helps us understand why Jesus uses such intense language because of how the people of the synagogue in Smyrna had fallen into the Satanic spirit of *accusation*. That the work of Satan most often manifests itself through the accusation of others. Specifically, in this case, by accusing the followers of Jesus in Smyrna of being the problem. Of being an enemy of the state. Of being a threat to the prosperous Smyrnan way of life. Of not having the best interests of their city or the economy or the empire in mind.

But I think Jesus also used this intense spiritual language to remind his followers that the people of this synagogue weren't *their* enemy. That the crushing they were facing was not a struggle against flesh and blood, but part of a larger spiritual reality at play. As he then said:

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 life as your victor's crown.

As Jesus so often does, he says, "do not be afraid" in what you're facing. He says, *the devil* – again, making it clear this is not about the people of the synagogue or the Roman authorities cause there's more going on here – will put you in prison to test you. The word *test* here can be translated as "to prove" or even "to improve." That while Jesus is making it clear that things for his followers in Smyrna are only going to get worse rather than better, he says this is only going to further *prove* how faithful you are to me. And through the crushing you're experiencing will only *improve* the fullness of the wealth and example of your faith.

And then he ends this portion of his letter with a promise that would've touched the hearts of none more than the truly faithful citizens of the *Crown of Asia* city of Smyrna by saying: *And you don't have to be afraid, and you can stay faithful even to the point of death, because, I have a true crown in store for you, the crown of life – the crown of eternal life. The crown of eternal life with me in my eternal city* (a city still to be seen and encountered in the pages of *Revelation* ahead)!

Friends, this is Jesus' letter to the church of Smyrna, a letter I believe makes clear that following Jesus is unlikely to make our lives easier. But, shows us that no matter what we face, staying faithful to Jesus *can make life better* – better because of the eternal realities of the life he has for us. Not easier, but eternal – and available, starting here and now.

So friends, what can learn and take away from the reality of this letter today?

First, I think it's worth acknowledging that for the most part, by God's grace few of us are facing the same degree of crushing persecution as the church of Smyrna. But some Jesus-followers around the world are and we need to pray for them. And, some among us are experiencing hardship and poverty because of broken systems or conditions in our city, and we need to compassionately respond and take responsibility to meet these needs together.

Second, I think we need to be mindful of the spirit of accusation in our world. Especially in the polarization of our times, I believe the Satanic spirit of accusing "the other side" is far too alive and well. So let's not give in to this spirit of accusation. As followers of Jesus, let's not pick sides, let's pick Jesus. And if you find yourself being accused, or gossiped about, or the subject of rumours, or criticized because of your faith in Jesus and your allegiance to his unconditional all-inclusive self-sacrificing love, let's not see our accusers as our enemies, but know we're in the company of what it feels like at times for those who stay faithful to Jesus.

Third, let's recognize Jesus *expects* life to get harder, not easier, when we follow him. So, if you're exploring the prospect of following Jesus, he invites you to count this cost. But all in the light of his eternal promise of how worth it following him is! And if you've been following Jesus for a while, one way we can reflect on our faithfulness these days is simply by assessing whether our lives are getting easier or harder – by whether I'm living with the goal of making my life feel more like easy street, or whether I'm staying so faithful to Jesus I'm finding my experience of life becoming less and less easy, but more and more worth it.

And finally, maybe for some of us, you do feel like you're being crushed these days. Crushed emotionally. Crushed relationally. Crushed financially. Maybe even crushed physically. And if that's you, Jesus wants you to hear that not only is he with you, but he's in the business of bringing something rich out of the crushing. Like myrrh crushed into perfume in Smyrna or grapes crushed into wine in Niagara, that even when we experience crushing in our lives, especially as a result of our faithfulness to Jesus, Jesus – as the First and the Last, as the one who died and yet lives – has the power to turn our crushing into a crown.

As one of only two of Jesus' seven letters to the seven churches that exclusively provides commendation without correction, what's also remarkable about the church of Smyrna is that, in spite of the crushing persecution that was faced by these Jesus-followers in Smyrna at this time, of these seven churches Jesus specifically addresses in Revelation, only the church of Smyrna still exists and functions today with a faithful Jesus-following community in **modern-day Izmir**. That the Jesus-followers in Smyrna did, in fact, stay faithful – for some of them, even to the point of death. And while their faithfulness to Jesus didn't make their lives easier, the continued faithfulness of Jesus-followers in Izmir today, to me, is evidence of Jesus' eternal faithfulness to them and the crown of life they received as their reward.

Friends, I don't want to opt for easier. I want to stay faithful to Jesus even when following Jesus makes life hard. Cause while following Jesus may not always – or often – make life easier, I truly believe following Jesus makes life better. Makes life worth it. Not easier, but eternal – all with an invitation to begin tasting and experiencing the crown of eternal life in Jesus here and now!