

Revelation 2:8-11

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[0 : 0 0] Life is all about choices. To a significant extent, you are what you choose.

Moses was an old man, and his days were numbered. He stood before a multitude of God's people on the threshold of taking possession of the promised land. They had wandered 40 years in the desert, and now they were this close. They could see the promised land. They could smell the promised land.

And Moses solemnly challenges the people with these words. This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses.

Now choose life, so that you and your children may live, and that you may love the Lord your God. Listen to his voice, and hold fast to him, for the Lord is your life. And Moses, it goes on.

Choices, big choices. And we can fast forward some 1600 years, give or take, and in the words of Jesus directed to the church at Smyrna, we can detect a similar contrasting of life and death, and the implicit call to choose life. Jesus urges the believers in Smyrna, be faithful even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown. But there is the solemn alternative of experiencing the second death. What will you choose? I want to consider the message of Jesus to the church in Smyrna in the following way. We're going to identify five truths about the church in Smyrna that Jesus knows. Everything that Jesus says in the message follows on from and is grounded in his declaration, I know. There in verse 9, we find it in each of the letters, this very significant declaration on the part of Jesus, I know. And then he continues to describe what he knows.

[2 : 3 4] And everything that we discover, everything that we can consider about the church in Smyrna is on the basis of what Jesus knows about them and shares with us in the words that we're going to be considering. And we're going to identify five truths that Jesus knows. We're going to think of them, draw out the significance of them, but then also for each of them, identify how there is implicit in these truths a challenge and a choice for us, for you today. So, this is what Jesus knows about Smyrna, a church in Asia Minor a couple of thousand years ago. But each of the things that he knows about them, as I say, carries within it a challenge and a choice for us as well. We want to consider what they are, and I trust respond to them. So, let's launch into these five truths and see how we get on as we consider them one by one. I think the first thing that we can say that Jesus says about the church in Smyrna is along these lines, and I paraphrase, I know what really matters, and I know that you do too. He's commending them. He's saying, I know what really matters, and you share with me that discernment about what really matters. As I say, these are words that really paraphrase what Jesus is saying there at the beginning of verse 9, I know your afflictions and your poverty, yet you are rich.

What is Jesus referring to, and what is he affirming when he says, I know your affliction and your poverty, yet you are rich. Somehow he's talking about what really matters. Well, let's think about the language he uses and what he is likely to be referring to when he speaks about their afflictions and poverty. The very language that is employed suggests that the affliction that is being referenced was very intense and severe affliction. Indeed, even the word that is used translated poverty is on the more extreme end of the scale of poverty that is implied. But what's the cause? Why are they suffering so? Why are they so poor? You know, some have suggested that the gospel message attracted the poor and the marginalized, and hence their poverty. Why are they poor? Well, it's because it's the poor who have embraced Jesus and come to faith in Jesus. Well, it's certainly true that the gospel is good news for the poor in the broadest sense of that word. But here, in the reference Jesus makes to their affliction and poverty, the affliction and poverty of the church in Smyrna, it seems clear that the gospel or loyalty to the God of the gospel is the cause of their poverty. Though it's not stated explicitly, it does seem implicit that this is so. Why are they poor? Because of their loyalty to Jesus.

Now, how does that follow? It's not always the case that loyalty to Jesus results in material poverty. It's not the case for most of us, perhaps for all of us. Why was it so for the believers in Smyrna?

Well, there's a couple of possibilities as to why this might be the case. First of all, their refusal to participate in the imperial cult. Now, we've made reference to this already in speaking about the church in Ephesus, so we won't dwell on that. But we explained that participation in the imperial cult was also or often required of those involved in the trade guilds and in commercial activity in these cities. And to refuse to participate could have commercial, financial, material consequences on those taking such a stand. So, perhaps for that reason, they found themselves impoverished, materially impoverished. It's also possible that they'd suffered attacks at the hands of their enemies. In the letter, reference is made to those who are very hostile to them. I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not. We'll come to that in a moment. But clearly, there were enemies of the believers in Smyrna, and perhaps they had attacked them in one way or another, and as a result, left them impoverished. If you could imagine any outside observer looking on at the church in Smyrna, the Christians in Smyrna, they would have concluded that they were a sorry crew to be pitied or despised as fools or fanatics. Some perhaps might even have mocked that the God to whom they always seemed to be praying was not listening or was not interested or perhaps was incapable of helping. That's what the evidence seemed to suggest. Here they were.

They claimed to follow Jesus. They worshiped Jesus. They prayed to Jesus. But they're poor. They're afflicted, and everything seems to be going badly wrong for them. But what is God's opinion of his people in Smyrna? What really matters for God? Well, we discover what really matters for God in what he says there, immediately having mentioned their affliction and their poverty.

[8 : 09] I know your afflictions and your poverty, yet you are rich. They were rich in faith. Indeed, their faithfulness in the face of their affliction and poverty demonstrated that they were spiritually wealthy. This is what James is talking about when in his letter he speaks of Christians as rich in faith. He actually uses that expression that's implicit here that he coins or expresses explicitly, rich in faith. And Jesus is saying this is what really matters. Jesus is saying I know what really matters, and it delights me that you believers in Smyrna share that knowledge. You know what really matters? To be rich in faith. To use the intriguing language of Jesus in the parable of the rich fool, we are told to be rich towards God. This is what matters. Faith in God, trust in God, loyalty to God, persevering in the service of God. That is the measure of us as Christians.

What about us? What about you? What really matters to you? Jesus is speaking to the believers in Smyrna, but what he's speaking about here is applicable to us as it is applicable to God's people in every place and in every generation. What really matters to you? Do you value what God values? In your own life, what do you most value? What do you invest in? What occupies your mind and time and affections?

What are your dreams and aspirations? These things will give you a pretty good insight into what you most value. Does what you value align with what God values? Think about it. When God looks down on us, when He looks down on you, is He impressed with your great job or your fancy car or your successful family or your well-planned retirement or whatever else it might be? Now, God is not indifferent to any of these things.

But what does God delight in? What does He most value? Well, it's very clear from the message that He directs to the church in Smyrna that what He most delights in is the faith of His people, in a people who trust in Him.

He delights in faith and trust, in love and loyalty, in sacrifice and perseverance. These are the things, Jesus says, that really matter. So, I know what really matters is one of the truths that we find, and Jesus is delighted to discover or to acknowledge that in Smyrna, largely, God's people shared that value system, if you wish. Let's think of another thing that we discover or something that Jesus knows and that He speaks of here in this message. And the second thing is this. He says this, I know what you're going through and I care. And again, we're paraphrasing really the second half of verse 9. In the second half of verse 9, He says, I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Clearly, this was a circumstance, a particular circumstance that the believers in Smyrna were facing of opposition. This isn't something that Jesus is saying will happen in the future, we'll come to that. This is something that was already happening. It was already the source of affliction, perhaps, as we've hinted, perhaps, the source of their poverty as well. A trial that they were enduring, opposition, hostility from these people who are described as those who say they are Jews but are not. And Jesus says,

[12:16] I know about that. I know about their slander. I know what they're saying, and I care about that. Now, what is going on here? What is the reference to? In the early decades of the New Testament church, the Roman authorities viewed Christians as a Jewish sect. So, from the perspective of the Roman authorities, they were just part of Judaism. They came under the umbrella of the treatment that was given to Jews. Now, because of that, in those early years, the church enjoyed some of the protections afforded to Jews. For example, Jews were granted a measure of dispensation in participation in the imperial cult. The Romans knew that the Jews were ardent and vigorous monotheists. They knew that for the Jews it was a real issue to worship other gods. Now, many of the pagan peoples that they subjected had no problem with adding another god to their pantheon of gods, but for the Jews, this was a real issue. And the Romans were aware of that, and pragmatically they said, okay, well, you Jews, you don't need to participate to the same extent. And the Christians enjoyed some of that privilege because they were viewed as simply part of that complex mosaic of Jewish belief.

But with the passage of time, that began to change. And perhaps there's a number of reasons for that. And I don't claim any expertise as to, you know, following the timeline of how that changed. But at one level, it seems reasonable that one of the reasons why that would have changed is the increasing presence of Gentiles within the Christian communities, and especially when many of the leaders of these Christian communities were increasingly Gentiles themselves. And so, it was more difficult for the Romans to view the Christians as simply part of the Jews. But another reason, and the one perhaps that is at play here in Smyrna, was that the Jews in different communities were disowning the Christians, saying, they've got nothing to do with us, and indeed agitating the Roman authorities and saying, you're treating them as if they were Jews, but they're not Jews. We're the Jews. And seemingly here in Smyrna, that's what was going on. This synagogue of Satan, though the language is rather dramatic, is probably a reference to the actual synagogue in Smyrna. And within the actual synagogue in Smyrna, the Jewish authorities hated the Christians. They saw them as traitors to the faith, and they were agitating the authorities. Don't give them any privileges. Don't treat them as Jews. They're not Jews. We are Jews. Not them. And of course, this was creating trouble and problem for the Christians. And the language of slander is used. No doubt there were false accusations being leveled against them by the Jews in Smyrna, or some of them, some of the Jews in Smyrna.

And Jesus assures the Christians in Smyrna that He knows what they're going through. He knows the truth. He cares for them. There's also possibly another element of quite striking solidarity in the language that Jesus uses. The word translated slander there in verse 9 is the Greek word *blasphemia*.

Now, we recognize that word *blasphemia* because it's so similar to our word *blasphemy*. And while it can have the sense of slander, it may be that Jesus views an attack on His people as an attack, a blasphemy against Himself. Reminds us a little bit of the exalted Jesus in His words to Saul of Tarsus.

Why are you persecuting me? And anybody who said, well, He's not persecuting the exalted Jesus. He's persecuting the Christians. But Jesus says, no, when you persecute them, you're persecuting me. And there may be a sense here that Jesus is saying that to the believers in Smyrna. You're having a hard time. You're being slandered. You're being attacked. You're being opposed. I don't just know about that.

[16 : 24] I am part of that. I am in solidarity with you. When they attack you, they attack me. Now, this knowledge of Jesus serves as a comfort for us that He knows what we're going through.

He knows the lies that are being spread. He knows what you are going through. Whatever it might be, it will be very different perhaps to what the believers in Smyrna were going through. But whatever it is, He knows what you're going through and He cares. But as well as a comfort, I think this constitutes a challenge. The slanderers here considered themselves as God's people.

Jesus is using the word Jews really as synonymous with God's people. These people say they are Jews. They claim to be trusting in God, but they are God's enemies. That's what Jesus is saying.

And there's a permanent danger of that. There's a permanent possibility of that. What about you? Your very presence this morning would indicate that you claim to be, in some way, make some profession to be a Christian. But are you? It is a solemn reality that the one who in Revelation affirms time and again, I know you, on that great and solemn day will declare to many, I never knew you. There's another thing I want to draw out from the message to Smyrna, about what Jesus knows. And we can put it in this way, I know what you're about to go through, and I'm in control. See, in verse 10, Jesus moves on from a present difficulty to an anticipated future difficulty. Imminent, no doubt, but future nonetheless. Verse 10, do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. So, this is something that hasn't happened yet, but the language suggests that it's imminent. You know, you're about to suffer these things. And Jesus is saying, I know.

I know what you're about to suffer. But He's not only saying that I know what you're about to suffer, but I'm in control of this. You know, when it happens, be assured that I know about it and I'm in control of it. Now, what is the cause or who is the author of their impending suffering? Well, He is identified as the devil. Do not be afraid of what you're about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you. And it goes on. Now, who would actually apprehend them and put them in prison? Well, presumably the Roman authorities or those working for the Roman authorities. The agitation of the Jews seemingly is having effect, and now the Romans are getting involved or about to get involved and imprison the believers as a result of the slander, no doubt, that they have been victims of. But Jesus identifies that behind the human agents, it is the devil himself who is responsible, responsible for this unholy alliance between the Jews and the Roman authorities. Prison would only be possible with the involvement of the Roman authorities.

[19 : 37] The Jews themselves wouldn't have had that power. What is the nature of their impending suffering? Well, it is described as persecution, persecution that will result in imprisonment and for some death.

Now, this is a somber message that Jesus is delivering, but what can we draw from what He says? And I think there are three key truths that the words of Jesus reveal. They're very connected, but I think we can distinguish between them. The first, perhaps very obvious one, is that Jesus knows the future. He's able to say to the believers in Smyrna, do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. He knows what they're about to suffer. He's not just anticipating it. He's not just reading the signs of the times and He's saying, well, this is probably going to happen because there's all this opposition and this hoo-ha and no doubt it will result in this.

No, He says, I know what's going to happen. I know who of you will be in prison. I know who of you are going to die. I know what's going to happen. I know the future. He has that knowledge, that divine knowledge. He knows the future. But of course, it's so much more than just knowledge. It's clear that He controls the future. Here, the reference to ten days, a somewhat at face value intriguing reference.

You know, there in verse 10, we read, 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. And then He goes on. Ten days, well, that doesn't sound so bad. You know, ten days. I suppose it depends what the nature of the persecution is. If you're killed within those ten days, then, you know, that's small comfort that it's just ten days. But we read that and we think, well, ten days, you know. At first, it's, well, what does that even mean? You know, it seems so precise. There's a couple of things perhaps going on here when Jesus places this time scale, if you wish, to their persecution. It is quite possible that there is a reference here to the testing of Daniel and his friends that we read of there in the first chapter of Daniel. Jesus describes this persecution as a time of testing. And Daniel and his friends, their faith was tested for ten days. And as we've commented throughout Revelation, there are these sometimes very explicit and other times less explicit references to or allusions to the book of Daniel.

And so, there's possibly something going on there with regards to the ten days. But perhaps more importantly, by placing a time scale, Jesus is affirming his control of events. It's as if he is saying, look, when it comes to persecution, I'm the one who says to your enemies, hear and no further.

[22 : 20] Ten days, not more than ten days. Why? Because I determine these things. They don't determine these things. They seem to be the ones in control. They seem to be the ones with absolute power. But no, it's not so. I determine the times. I determine the time of testing that you will endure. He's assuring the believers that intense though it will be, it is of limited duration. Reminds me of Paul.

You know, Paul speaks of our momentary troubles, not worthy to be compared with the glory that awaits us. He knows the future. Jesus controls the future. And of course, very much connected with controlling the future. But I just make this distinction. He orders the future. He orders all things for the good of his people. This is part of his control. But in particular, I'm highlighting the reference to the indication of purpose in their suffering. You'll notice there again in verse 10, I tell you the devil will put some of you in prison to test you. So, Jesus is saying, not only do I know this is going to happen, not only am I controlling this, but I have a purpose in it and a good purpose. And the good purpose is that your faith will be tested and so strengthened and matured and deepened.

And so, he uses the evil acts of evil men for the good of his own people. Now, again, there is so much here that provides, I'm sure, provided comfort to the believers in Smyrna, but also provides comfort and assurance to us as God's people today. But there's also a challenge and a choice to be made.

Will you identify with God and his people, even and especially in the face of opposition and persecution and seeming disadvantage? Or will you take the seemingly easy road of compromise and keeping your head down? I think this will be for us increasingly a choice that we will be having to make. Perhaps the words that were addressed to Smyrna are very soberly true and appropriate for the church of Jesus Christ in our own land today. Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I know what you are going through and I'm in control. But there's a penultimate thing I want to mention about what Jesus knows, and it is this. Jesus says to the Christians in Smyrna, I know what you must do. I know what you must do. What is it that they need to do in the face of this impending persecution, indeed in the face of the current difficulties that they have? Well,

Jesus says two things that they need to do. One, I suppose, is something they ought not to do, but we can think of it as two things they need to do. In verse 10, do not be afraid. But then in the same verse, in the second half of the verse, there's another challenge to the believers. In the face of all of these circumstances, be faithful. Do not be afraid. Be faithful. Or if we put it in other language, Jesus is saying to the Christians, trust in me and be loyal to me. That's what I'm asking of you. Trust in me and be loyal to me. Yes, you will suffer. Yes, you are suffering. Yes, it will be intense in character. But trust in me. Don't be afraid. Be faithful. Be loyal to me. This call to be faithful, be faithful, can be seen and we maybe read it as a kind of battle cry. Be faithful.

[25 : 59] But perhaps more, it's a call to imitation. A call to imitate Jesus. We are called to be faithful even to the point of death. That's the language of Jesus. And is that not what was true of Jesus?

That He was faithful. He was obedient even to the point of death. As we read in the Bible describing Jesus, He was obedient or faithful even unto death and death on a cross. So this call to be faithful is in a sense a call to imitation. Be like me is what Jesus is saying. I was faithful. I endured even to death. I call on you to do likewise as circumstances demand. Now history records that there were those in Smyrna who rose to the challenge laid down by Jesus in this very letter. It's quite possible that one of the original congregation in Smyrna may have been Polycarp. Now Polycarp became the Bishop of Smyrna in 115 AD. Now what we mentioned a couple of weeks ago was that Revelation was written or at least the consensus is that it was written towards the end of the first century. So Polycarp, if he became the

Bishop of Smyrna in 115, it's not unreasonable to imagine that in the late 90s he would have been part of that congregation. We don't know that for certain but it seems a reasonable supposition.

Irenaeus, one of the church fathers, describes Polycarp as a disciple of John which adds another connection here. But the thing about Polycarp that I just want to mention is this, that on being arrested and condemned to death for refusing to burn incense to the emperor, this imperial cult that we've commented on already. Polycarp is reputed to have responded with these words. He's about to be burnt at the stake and he said this, Eighty and six years I have served him and he has done me no wrong.

How then can I blaspheme my King and Saviour? You threaten me with a fire that burns for a season and after a little while is quenched. But you are ignorant of the fire of everlasting punishment, that is prepared for the wicked. And with these words the flames began to burn and he was burnt and speared to his death.

[28 : 31] What about you and me? The call is to be faithful. Are you faithful or are you faithless? Are you faithful or do you cling and trust in God and so enjoy having those fears dispelled?

Will you trust in God and not be afraid? Come what may. There's one final thing I want to notice here about what Jesus knows about the church in Smyrna that applies really to all of us. And we can paraphrase it this way or summarize it this way. He says to them, I know the faith or the reward of the faithful and of the faithless. Notice then again in verse 10, be faithful even to the point of death and I will give you life as your victor's crown. There's a reward placed before God's people. Be faithful and this is what you will receive. But then in contrast he goes on to make reference to an alternative, an alternative that clearly is the fate of those who are faithless. In reference there made in verse 11 to this second death. Let's just think about these two fates or these two rewards. What is the reward of the faithful? Well, there we've read it. I will give you life as your victor's crown. And to be clear, the one who offers life is the one with all authority to do so. He can and will deliver. You see, these are the words of the one who describes himself in verse 8 as the first and the last who died and came to life again. So the one who died and came to life again has every authority to say, I will give you life. I've conquered death. I am the living one and so I can and do offer life to those who are faithful. Be faithful and I will give you life as your victor's crown. This is the reward for faithfulness.

The reward for the faithful is life, eternal life, life with God in the paradise of God, picking up on the language addressed to the church in Ephesus there in verse 7.

But then you have also very solemnly the fate or the reward of the faithless. In verse 11 we read, whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, to the one who perseveres, to the one who is faithful. The one who is these things will not be hurt at all by the second death. But it's very clear that those who are not faithful, those who are not victorious, those who do not persevere, they will experience this outcome, this second death. Now, what is the second death? We don't have time to delve into it in great detail, but what we can do is simply read what is said of it in this same book of Revelation. And simply reading what is said, I think, will be sufficient to make clear, solemnly clear, what Jesus is talking about.

In Revelation chapter 20 and verses 14 and 15, we read, Then death and Hades, and note that the section is entitled there in our Bibles, the judgment of the dead. And there towards the end of that section we read, Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. So it's clear, this is the second death.

[31 : 53] Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire. Then in the following chapter, in chapter 21, reading from verse 6, and here in verses 6 to 8, you have the same contrast between those who are faithful and those who are faithless.

Verse 6 of chapter 21, He said to me, It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children. But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars, they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death. So Jesus makes clear what this second death that He is speaking about is referring to. We all die physically, but there is a second death, a much more grievous and solemn matter as it is vividly described in symbolic language, no doubt, but no less solemn for that in the verses that we've read.

This is the fate of those who are faithless. So where are you heading? What will be your reward? Life or death? Heaven or hell? The paradise of God or the lake of fire?

These are solemn matters that you have to give attention to. So many choices. So many challenges. You are what you choose. Choose life. Trust in Jesus. Be faithful to Jesus and choose life. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for your Son, Jesus, our Savior. We thank you that he is the one who knows. We acknowledge that we are often very adept at giving an impression to others of who we are.

[34 : 04] Perhaps even fooling ourselves as to who we are and what we value and where we're heading. But we acknowledge that you're the one who knows.

And we pray that you would help us to have that knowledge, to know who we are and where we are and where we are heading. And that we would be able, humbly and yet gratefully to be able to affirm that we are trusting in Jesus.

That we are resting in him. That we are looking to him. And as we do, so we can indeed look forward to that eternal life that is promised to his own.

Help us then, each of us, to choose life, to trust in Jesus and to be faithful to him. And we pray these things in his name. Amen.