

## Real Riches

Revelation 2:8-11

**Main Point:** In times of tribulation/persecution, believers are to remain faithful to the Lord Jesus, even to the point of death, by focusing their attention on their coming reward and the true riches they already possess in union with Him.

### Introduction: Are we in “Negative World”?

We are continuing our study of the message of Jesus to the 7 churches in Revelation 1-3. As Pastor Stan has stated, in these chapters we get the clearest, most comprehensive statements in the NT about what Jesus Himself has to say about who the church is to be, and what the church is to do. To review, these chapters record for us the specific instructions Jesus gives to a group of churches in the first century in an area known then as Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). The writer of Revelation is the Apostle John, the disciple who was one of Jesus’s closest friends and one of His most devoted followers. Of all the disciples, it was John who was present at the crucifixion of Jesus. It was John, whom Jesus Himself entrusted to the care of His elderly and grieving mother, Mary. And now, as the last living disciple, the aged apostle shares with this group of churches he was responsible for overseeing and pastoring, a vision that he received from the Lord Jesus while he was in exile on an island called Patmos, off the coast of modern-day Greece. In these chapters we catch a glimpse of what the early church, towards the end of the first century, was like – their strengths, weaknesses, their struggles. But, as Pastor Stan has pointed out, these churches also serve as template, as a paradigm, for the church today. We can see these same characteristics, and combination thereof, in churches today. So, the words of Jesus are, living words – not just historical – but instructive for us today!

This morning, we are going to give attention to the words of Jesus for the church in Smyrna, in verses 8-11 in chapter 2. Now, like the church in Philadelphia (which we’ll get to in a few weeks), and unlike the rest of them, the church in Smyrna does not receive a rebuke from Jesus. But instead, Jesus gives this church words of encouragement and specific instruction on how to prepare for the trials they were soon going to be encountering. Jesus’s message to the church in Smyrna is a timely one for Christians living in the West. While we aren’t experiencing imprisonments or death squads, as believers in other parts of the world are, there is a growing sense among many Christian leaders that something in our culture has definitely shifted in terms of how the broader culture views Christianity – and not in a good way. In recent years, seems to be a growing hostility towards Christian beliefs and Christians in general. Some of this hostility can be attributed towards bad Christian behavior, giving a poor witness and representation of Christ – but there is also an element that no matter how humble, kind, winsome we may be, in some quarters in our public square, there is a visceral reaction against basic Christian beliefs.

### *Living in Negative World*

A new conversation has recently emerged on the blogosphere and in some journals about this current state of evangelicalism in American society. Some of you may be familiar with the term that writer/journalist Aaron Renn refers to as “Negative World”. According to Renn, Christians in the West (particularly North America) are entering a new cultural moment in which they are experiencing more and more overt cultural hostility which could, in time, evolve into some various forms of persecution. According to Wrenn, modern evangelicalism can be divided into three phases or “three worlds” as he terms them:

1. Positive World (Pre-1994). Christianity was viewed positively by society and Christian morality was still normative. To be seen as a religious person and one who exemplifies traditional Christian norms was a social positive. Christianity was a status enhancer. In some cases, failure to embrace Christian norms hurt you.
2. Neutral World (1994-2014). Christianity is seen as a socially neutral attribute. It no longer had dominant status in society, but to be seen as a religious person was not a knock either. It was more like a personal affectation or hobby. Christian moral norms retained residual force.
3. Negative World (2014-). In this world, being a Christian is now a social negative, especially in high status positions. Christianity in many ways is seen as undermining the social good. Christian morality is expressly repudiated.

While we may want to nuance and question some of the details of Renn’s proposal, I do think, broadly and generally speaking, that he offers a valid framework for interpreting some of the shifts that have taken place over time in American culture in regard to the church. The key takeaway, which has parallels with the context of the first century as we will see is that Christians are considered bad citizens. Bad for society...

**Key Question:**

So, the question for today, as we look at our text in light of our current situation, is how does the church, and individual believers, give witness to the glory and beauty and power of the LJC in the midst of a hostile or potentially hostile environment? I believe the words of Jesus to the church in Smyrna will be instructive for us. Revelation 2:8-11

**Question 1: Why is the church in Smyrna being threatened with persecution?**

Roman life was shaped around worship and homage to the gods. One scholar put it like this: “In the normal world of experience, as we walk the streets of any city in the Roman empire, we hear the story of a defective world rescued by the arrival of the Roman empire, whose savior deities, the Roman gods and Roman emperors, delivered the warring nations from their strife and insecurity, and whose benign control of trade and borders protects a newly installed era of peace and prosperity. This is the story we have dinned into our ears repeatedly through imperial propaganda, eagerly adopted by local dignitaries who promote Rome’s interests to foster their own.” – John Barclay, NT scholar

Participation in the Emperor cult was tied in to economic and political life of the culture, and varied city to city in terms of its intensity. Smyrna was very loyal to Rome, evidenced by more than one temple built in honor of Rome (shrine to Homer, may have been born there; to temple to a mother goddess and to Tiberius, later to Hadrian – Roman heroes). So, for a typical citizen, it was nearly impossible to be a full participant in the city’s public life without some paying some kind of homage to Caesar or to the gods. To not do so, was considered unpatriotic and disloyal to the government / culture. In other words, if you did not participate in the cultic and civil activities of the empire, you were A BAD CITIZEN. Now, according to Roman law, Jews were tolerated by Roman Empire. They were allowed to continue observing sabbath, having synagogues, and carrying out their life without having to necessarily participate in the cultic activities that the common Roman/Greek citizen was required to do. Now, Christians were under that umbrella, more or less, up until the persecution under from 64-67. After that point, the relationship between Christians and the state became tenuous, and depended on the favorability of local officials, the policies of the emperor and the like. However, the church in Smyrna refused to participate in the worship of Caesar and were therefore considered bad citizens!

**Question 2: What is the synagogue of Satan?**

Jesus says that there is some kind of slander going on. And He says it is from Jews, who are not really true Jews, but of the synagogue of Satan. What does this mean? First, the term “synagogue of Satan” is not some antisemitic remark; Jesus isn’t being racist. This is a theological distinction that was actually used in some of extra-biblical Jewish literature, referencing those who claim to be worshippers and followers of Yahweh, but really weren’t. Jesus and the New Testament writers often distinguish between true and false “Israelites”. Historical context is important here. One of the hallmarks of Jesus’s ministry is defining who is a true “Jew” (i.e., believer in God and member of the Abrahamic family), and who is not. Remember the story when the disciples came to Jesus, early on in His ministry, and they said, “Hey, your mom and your brothers are looking for you!” (In other words, you are in trouble!). Remember Jesus’s response: He looked around at the crowd and said, “Anyone who does the will of God, is my mother, my brothers, my sister.” And what exactly is the “will of God”? Well, we know from John’s earlier writings in his gospel, that God’s will for His people, is to believe in the one He sent. So, the New Testament writers, we see this in Paul, Peter, and the writer of Hebrews – they redefine an “Israelite” not as someone who belongs to ethnic Israel per say, but anyone who belongs to Jesus – whether Jew or Gentile. So, the hostility we see from the unbelieving Jews during the life of Jesus, and the time of the Apostles, is a sign of their rejection of Jesus, and a rejection, ultimately, of God.

Now, here is the irony – and we see this irony in the gospel stories and in Acts – that these false Jews are “slandering” the Christians in Smyrna. What does that mean? Just name-calling? No – the “slander” spoken of here is actually a political accusation, being made to the Roman authorities. They are reporting them to local officials of the greatest offense you could commit as a Roman citizen – to not do your patriotic duty of paying homage to Caesar and the gods. So, what we have here are these Jewish officials in cahoots with Roman officials about the fact that these Christians in Smyrna were not paying homage to Caesar! Now, the relationships between Jews and Christians today is not marked by the same hostilities that were present in the first century. Today, we would look at our Jewish friends and neighbors as people with whom we have much in common, but still want them to find their true Messiah – Jesus. However, the historical picture I am painting for you reflects the political realities of the first century. These hostilities existed and participating in the economic/public life in the Roman empire required allegiances with Caesar, and the emperor cult. And because of this, because of their allegiance to Jesus – and not Caesar – the early church was headed for trouble. The

“Synagogue of Satan” refers to local Jewish leaders who were accusing the Christians in Smyrna of being “bad citizens” because they refused to participate in the Emperor-cult.

### **Question 3: What is the “10 days in prison” refer to?**

And knowing this, Jesus warns them – it’s about to get worse! Look again at verse 10. Jesus assures them that they will have tribulation – 10 days’ worth, that might even include prison.

*10 days of tribulation: literal or figurative?*

Now, the 10 days could be literal, or they might be figurative. Greg Beale, one of my favorite New Testament scholars suggests another possibility to an allusion to Daniel 1:12-15. In the story of Daniel, where Daniel and his friends avoid the king’s food for 10 days. Doing so, they came back fitter and healthier. Now, this story isn’t about eating a better diet – that the king had bunches of candy bars, and Daniel and his crew wanted bananas. No, the point is, that Daniel and his friends avoided idolatry – the king’s food was being sacrificed and blessed by false gods, by idols! They were following the law of Moses in this regard. And it was a time of testing! So then, according to Beale, Jesus here is saying that just as Daniel and his friends underwent a period of testing where they had to stand up for their faith, for their belief in Yahweh, and not follow the idolatrous practices of the Babylonian empire. Likewise, the church in Smyrna will also be tested for a period of time represented by a “10 days of tribulation” that includes imprisonment and possibly even death – it was considered to be a capital crime against the empire to reject Caesar and his gods. Either way – literal 10 days or select period of time analogous to Daniel – Jesus promises that tough times are coming for this church.

*The “10 Days of Imprisonment” means coming future arrests, trials, prison, and possibly death.* Now, at first glance, this sounds rather discouraging, doesn’t it? Jesus, our Lord, Savior, Redeemer, Friend – pretty much says: you’re going to take in the shins for a season. But this is actually intended to be a word of encouragement – a word to give them strength! Let’s turn attention to what Jesus promises...

### **Question 4: What is the “Crown of Life” and “Second Death”?**

Jesus the better treasure... First, notice how Jesus introduces Himself: He is the first and the last; the one who died, and came to life. These are cosmic terms - similar to chapter 1 (cf. 1:17-18). Glorious picture of Jesus. And because they already hold fast to Jesus, Jesus says: you are rich! Their poverty is likely in part due to them not fully participating in the economic benefits that were available to them in the emperor cult. However, Jesus says, “You have a better treasure: namely, ME!”

*Crown of Life is Union with Christ.*

Look at the end of verse 10: What is the crown of life? Well, since this text comes from John, we can infer that the crown Jesus promises here is probably quite similar to what Jesus promises to His followers in the gospel which John writes under the guidance of the Spirit: eternal life. And what is eternal life? Again, in Jesus’s own words, when he prays to God in John 17, just before His arrest, trial and crucifixion, Jesus defines “eternal life” in this way. 3 And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. John 17:24. 24 Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. This then is what it means to have eternal life – it is to know God, and Christ, and know them by experiencing a saving union with the Father and Son. This is what we mean by being born again or born from above. It is a new spiritual birth in which our lives become joined to Christ, who joins us to God.

The crown of life is the fulfillment of that experience. Second death means reigning with Jesus forever. Now, Jesus goes on in v. 11 to say that the one who conquers, who remains faithful to the end, will not experience the second death. What does that mean? At the end of Revelation, in chapter 20, we are told that after Christ returns, God’s people will enjoy a thousand-year reign – which I take to be a permanent thing; it’s the beginning of the new creation – awaiting the final judgement. Look at what John says in Rev. 20:4-6

4 Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also, I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. 5 The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were

ended. This is the first resurrection. 6 Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with Him for a thousand years. What John describes here fits in exactly with what he records Jesus saying in John 11:25- 26. 25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

This is similar to what Paul describes in Colossians: Col. 3:1-4. If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. 3 For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. Taking these texts together, we have this beautiful portrait of union with Christ, which we experience now, in some measure, through the HS, but as we continue in faithfulness to Jesus – in this present life, with all of its turmoil, hardship, and trials – this spiritual union we enjoy now will be revealed in its fulness at the resurrection, where we will be rewarded with by King Jesus Himself, with an eternal crown and will join Him, and the Father, in the ruling/reign of the new creation that is coming – the new heavens, the new earth – for all eternity. The suffering/faithful Christians in Smyrna are promised a better treasure for their endurance: the enjoyment of spiritual union with Christ and everlasting life in His presence.

### **Summary/Main Point:**

So, Jesus is, in effect, saying, "Persecution/tribulation is coming; and it may cost you your life. But do not fear; do not give in to the temptation to avoid suffering by conforming to the false idols of Rome and Caesar. Instead, show the world what your real treasure is – ME! Hold fast to me, be my witness over against the false idols around you; and look forward to the glory that will be yours in the coming kingdom." In other words, Jesus is worth it! The believers in Smyrna are being called to live their lives in a way that clearly demonstrates that Jesus, not the emperor and his gods, is the true King of the world; and that living under His Lordship is where real life, real deliverance, real security, real treasures, are to be found. What the culture – both Jews and Gentiles – reject and mock is in actuality, the treasure of life.

So, we could say the main point of the passage is: In times of tribulation/persecution, believers are to remain faithful to the Lord Jesus, even to the point of death, by focusing their attention on their coming reward and the true riches they already possess in union with Him.

### **Application: Example from Polycarp**

So, what how might this text – these prophetic words of Jesus to this church in Smyrna at the end of the first century – apply to us today, here, in America, as we enter what Renn calls, "negative world"? To answer this question, I want to introduce you to one of Smyrna's most famous residents, who actually grew up in this church, and listened to these words from Jesus in the congregation when this letter was being read and was actually disciplined by the Apostle John himself: this man's name is Polycarp, who eventually became a bishop of these churches here in Asia Minor, and was martyred in this same city.

Another church father, Irenaeus, described Polycarp like this: "I could describe the very place in which the blessed Polycarp sat and taught; how he would speak of the conversations he had with John and with others who had seen the Lord. How did he make mention of their words and of whatever he had heard from them respecting the Lord." – Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons (southern France), famous church father. Now, this is true – when you read Polycarp's writings, you see him quoting scripture over and over again. He was a man just being absorbed by the word of God given through the apostles. His writings are online, and I would encourage you to google it and check it out for yourself. As a faithful pastor, Polycarp shepherded the churches and people under his care by admonishing them, from the teachings of Jesus and the Apostles, to imitate the Lord Jesus – His humility, meekness, and His commitment to doing the will of His heavenly father, even if that meant death.

However, as Jesus predicted, false Jews basically complained to Roman officials about Polycarp's teachings, in which he was encouraging his congregation to do exactly what Jesus said to do: be faithful to Him, and not swear allegiance to Caesar or participate in the idolatrous practices of the emperor cult. During this time, Polycarp has a dream, in which the Lord tells him that he will be burned alive. Polycarp accepts this dream as God's will and waits for his captors. So, when he heard them come, he went down and conversed with them, the bystanders marveling at his age and his constancy,

and wondering how there should be so much eagerness for the apprehension of an old man like him. [Polycarp] gave orders that a table should be spread for them to eat and drink at that hour, as much as they desired. And he persuaded them to grant him an hour that he might pray; and on their consenting, he stood up and prayed, being so full of the grace of God, that for two hours he could not hold his peace, and those that heard were amazed, and many repented that they had come against such a venerable old man. (Martyrdom of Polycarp 7:1-2)

So, when they come to arrest him, Polycarp prepares a meal, welcomes them, and says, “You’ve had a long journey, come and eat. Give me an hour to pray, and then I will go with you.” And the writer says they were so overwhelmed by his hospitality and prayers, they repented of ever having come after such a holy man. Polycarp goes with them, and later stands before a Roman governor in Smyrna, who tells him, “Swear to Caesar, denounce Christ, and you can go!” All of this can be over, if you will only reject Christ and pledge your allegiance to your true lord, Caesar (the Roman Emperor). When then [Polycarp] was brought before him, the proconsul. . . tried to persuade him to deny Christ by saying, “Have respect to your[old] age,” and . . . “Swear by the fortune of Caesar; repent and say, ‘Away with the atheists.’” Then Polycarp with solemn countenance looked upon the whole multitude of lawless heathens that were in the stadium and waved his hand to them; and groaning and looking up to heaven he said, “Away with the atheists.” Then the proconsul pressed him hard, saying, “Swear the oath [to Caesar], and I will release you; reject Christ.” (Martyrdom of Polycarp 9:1-2)

Here is Polycarp’s answer: “Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury; how then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?” So, they send him to be burned. Lots of other details about his death that I can’t get into here – again, the record of his martyrdom is free online if you want to read it or you can get his works online. But his martyrdom had the exact opposite effect on the church than what the Roman officials anticipated. Instead of cowardice and fear, the church became bolder. More martyrs would follow, and the church would grow, so that by the early 300’s, the Roman empire was predominately Christian. Where did Polycarp get this kind of spiritual Moxy, and confidence, and peace? Well, he got it from the church he grew up in in Smyrna – a church that was shaped by the words of Jesus here in Revelation 2.

Imagine with me what it would have been like for young Polycarp, maybe in his early 20’s, being active in his church (going to first century YAM, maybe looking for a wife, etc.), to learn that a letter, an epistle was coming to them from Pastor John, who had received a revelation from the Lord Jesus Himself, and there was a specific word for the church in Smyrna. They gather to hear the text we just read. And Polycarp says, “I want to be that kind of man; I want the Lord Jesus as my treasure; I want to experience the crown of life; I want to be able to joyfully endure 10 Days of Tribulation and reign with Him forever!” And eventually Pastor John is released from his exile on Patmos. Comes to visit the church, and for whatever reason, takes an interest in young Polycarp. He pours into him, teaching him how to interpret scripture, understand the teachings of Jesus, interpret, and apply the writings of Paul and Peter and the other apostles. Who knows maybe Polycarp presided at John’s funeral? He eventually becomes a bishop, taking John’s place and carrying on his legacy of faithful teaching, shepherding, and building a culture where Christ is treasured above all things – even personal safety.

And so, when the time comes for Polycarp’s faith to be tested, he’s ready. Why? Because the Lord Jesus was his treasure. Jesus was worth more to Polycarp than ten-thousand times anything the world could offer him. And Polycarp believed, that at the end of the ride, the crown of life was waiting for him. That the Jesus he loved and knew by faith in this life, would be there waiting for him at the resurrection, to personally welcome him into the realm of His eternal kingdom. So, what is the lesson here for us today, as we learn to exist in “Negative World”, that we can draw from Jesus’s message to Smyrna and the way this text is embodied in the life of Polycarp?

### **Application:**

Live in Joyful Resistance to the cultural pressures around us by treasuring Christ above all else. The issue isn’t whether or not there is coming persecution for the church in the West. Maybe there is and maybe there isn’t – but ultimately, it’s not something we can decide or control - it’s not up to us! God will be the one to decide the times and seasons of our life. The real issue is: Are we as a church prepared to live our lives in this place and this time that God has chosen for us, in joyful resistance to the cultural pressures around us, by exalting Christ as the true and real treasure of our lives? Is HE what matters most to us (persecution or no persecution)? What the Christians in Smyrna did, as evidenced by the life and witness of Polycarp, is they resolved that Christ would be the treasure of their lives, come what may. They resolved

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to not live according to Caesar's script, but Christ's! They resolved that no matter what the world threw at them, they were going to worship Christ, and imitate His example by doing good to all and even blessing and loving their enemies for His sake. They didn't live in fear, in pessimism, or negativity, but resolved to live with joyful resistance to the cultural pressures around them by treasuring Christ above all. Last week we heard from Pastor Mark about the warning given to the church in Ephesus about abandoning or forsaking the love they had at first; well, love for who or what? The Lord Jesus! The church in Ephesus was a doctrinally-sound, theologically-accurate church, and yet something was missing in their witness – the love they had at first. Might this also be a warning for us too, friends - we who are zealous about having sound- doctrine and theological precision – might we be in danger of this falling into this same temptation of focusing so much on correct doctrine, that we forget the one who whom the doctrine is about!

It's no mistake that the next church commended is the church in Smyrna, which embodies that which the church in Ephesus needed to be a doctrinally sound, theologically precise, biblically balanced community that loved and treasured the Lord Jesus, even above their own personal safety and livelihood. My prayer for us, friends, as we navigate these uncertain days in Negative World - where being a Christian is considered by some to be bad citizenry and may possibly invite more persecution in the future - is that we would follow the example of the church in Smyrna and take the words of the Lord Jesus given to them as being also for us – which they are! That EBC would be known for its joyful resistance to the cultural pressures around us. That we would not live in constant fear, or pessimism, or negativity, or with a mind-set that the glass-is-always-half-empty-for-the-kingdom-of-God, and Satan-is-winning-the-war; but rather we would live with a truly joyful resistance – resistance that is grounded in assurance knowing who really sits on the throne, who really calls the shots, and whose kingdom is actually coming. That our church would be known for its Christ-treasuring, Christ-exalting culture.

I close with these words from Polycarp:

“May the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ Himself, who is the Son of God, and our everlasting High Priest, build you up in faith and truth, and in all meekness, gentleness, patience, and long-suffering, forbearance, and purity; and may He bestow on you a lot and portion among His saints, and on us with you, and on all that are under heaven, who shall believe in our Lord Jesus Christ, and in His Father, who raised Him from the dead. Pray for all the saints. Pray also for kings, and rulers, and princes, and for those that persecute and hate you, and for the enemies of the cross, that your fruit may be manifest to all, and that you may be perfect in Him.” – Polycarp, Letter to the Philippians