

Dear Church: The 7 Letters Of Revelation

What goes on inside a soul that holds together both deep pain and expectant hope at the same time? Maybe it's an intrusive diagnosis or a lost job, the pain of a friendship broken, or the death of a loved one; many of us come into this place and are experiencing that immense pain. Or maybe we've just come through a season of that, or heaven forbid, we're moving into one without our knowing. There's an ache that is in all of us where we recognize the frailty of this life, and the brokenness of this world that we all experience.

We sang that song, "Oh, death is your sting?" That's the hope we hold. But some of us still feel the sting, and we are longing for the resurrection. We declare that in expectant hope. What goes on in a soul that holds deep pain and expectant hope at the same time? What happens when we hold those two things together is a deepening of the soul, an expansion of the soul, what the Psalms would say, deep calling out to deep. That's what the scriptures would attest to. When pain and hope are held together, and there's hope in the midst of pain, it's not a naivete, or an avoidance of what is real; rather, a rich holding to the realities of Jesus—loving Jesus in the midst of all that is broken. It is a different horizon, a different plane that one exists on.

We're in the middle of a teaching series that goes through the first two or three chapters of the Book of Revelation, and today we are talking about the letter written to the church in Smyrna. Jesus has words for that church. Words directly to those experiencing the pain that I've been talking about.

"I see your affliction," Jesus says. In many ways, this is the most tender of the seven letters. It's Pastor Jesus coming alongside an aching, hurting church, holding them close as they navigate the tension between the brokenness of this world and the expectant hope as well. So turn with me to Revelation 2 and let's wrestle with the question of how we can hold pain and hope inside the same human life.

Revelation 2:8 begins as all the letters do. "To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:" Before we dive in, a bit of important history. In about 600 BC, Smyrna was invaded by the Lydians. It was an attack that was an overwhelming success. Smyrna was essentially flattened. The defeat was so bad, the city was laid barren for 400 years. It's not an exaggeration to say that the city actually died, but obviously, we're reading a letter written to that church sometime after, so there was, in fact, a resurgence. The city rose to life.

Going from death to life is the very history of Smyrna. Not only did it come back, but it came back and thrived. By the time of the Revelation writing, the population had ballooned between 60,000 to 100,000 people. It was an influential port town with several trade and postal routes going through it, so it was very wealthy and powerful. It was an influential city primarily because of its dedication and loyalty to the Roman Empire.

The city contained a large library, a stadium, and a public theater that sat nearly 20,000 people. It had a golden street that traversed through its city limits. At one end of the road, there was a temple to Zeus, and on the other end, a temple to a different goddess. The picture you should have when you think of Smyrna is one of opulence, wealth, and flourishing, and all of that opulence, wealth, and flourishing was predicated on their commitment and loyalty to Rome.

What's interesting is that Smyrna became the center for the imperial cult, meaning the worship of the Caesar or of the Roman Empire. At the time this letter was written, Emperor Domitian was in power, and emperor worship was a required act throughout the empire. The refusal to worship the empire would often lead to persecution and even death. There's a story that goes around that once a year in Smyrna, all the citizens were required to burn incense at the altar of Caesar and declare that Caesar is Lord. Sound familiar? If they did this, they would receive a certificate that proved they had done their civic duty, and then all would go well for them.

Now, here's this church, right in the midst of this city, trying to maintain faithfulness to Jesus. They had a bit of a conflict of interest to declare Caesar is Lord, because they were built on quite the opposite, declaring that Jesus is Lord. The temptation for the church in Smyrna was always to join the empire. It was to worship Caesar and enjoy everything that came along with it. The battle before them was how to resist the allure of the empire. How to resist the pull toward that opulence, losing their distinctiveness in a culture that desperately attempted to pull them away.

This is the context in which Jesus writes this letter. Through John, he's writing to encourage them to maintain their faithfulness regardless of what could come. Here's what Jesus has to offer. *"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"* (Revelation 2:8).

Each of these letters opens with a different description of Jesus. This one hearkens back to Revelation 1, but even much further for the Smyrnaean Christians. They would've heard, "the first and the last," and it would have taken their minds all the way back to the prophet's words in Isaiah.

The idea of being the first and the last was a common phrase for God from the prophets. Isaiah 44 says, "*This is what the LORD says— Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God*" (Isaiah 44:6). Now think about that phrase in the context of what they were experiencing within the empire of Rome. They're experiencing that Israel's king is the first and the last. It is God, not Caesar.

They were pressed with this conflict of interest. But when Jesus comes along and writes this assurance and says, "*I am the first and the last*," he is reminding them that he is the God whom they worship. Jesus is the very manifestation of that God that the prophet spoke about so long ago. Contrary to Caesar being Lord over Rome, Jesus is Lord over creation.

Then he goes through the second statement, "*The one who died, and came to life.*" Now this is fascinating because the description not only offers encouragement, but it tells the story of Smyrna. Smyrna itself had died and came back to life. There's a sense in which the Smyrna and Christians are saying that they live in this place, and this is the one who had actually died and came back.

The hope, the encouragement here is to think of Jesus as being the eternal God, who is also deeply present with this church. He existed from before all time, the first and the last, and yet is also present, aware of their particular circumstances. This is the description that Jesus chooses to offer to encourage this persecuted church. Let's go on in verse 9. Jesus continues. "*I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan*" (v. 9).

There are three things that Jesus names that he knows about this church. First, their affliction. The word here means to be pressed in or crushed. It's that experience like in Star Wars when they are trapped in a garbage compactor, and it's pressing in around them. That's the image that comes to mind for me.

He says that he knows their affliction. They were being pressed in on every side. This word is specifically in connection with Christian suffering. Meaning suffering for the sake of claiming Jesus is Lord. That's how it is used throughout the New Testament. It's the affliction they were experiencing because they were trying to maintain faithfulness, trying to hold deep pain and hope in the same context. It was their following Jesus within the midst of this pagan city that was causing this affliction.

Poverty

Then Jesus goes on to name two aspects of that affliction. So affliction is in the singular, and then he describes it. "*I know your*

affliction; your poverty and that you are being slandered." First, poverty. The Greek word means destitute, abject poverty. They were experiencing a literal financial disadvantage. They did not have the funds that would often occur in this opulent city. This church would resist the worship of local gods, and it would call into question their own financial exercises or business.

Why would someone from within Smyrna do business with a farmer who refuses to worship the God of agriculture? What happens if that crop then rots through? That doesn't seem like a good investment. So, they would avoid working with the Smyrnaean Christians. The circumstances of their lives were that they were poor. It reminds me of the words of Jesus at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. "*Blessed are the poor in spirit.*" It is the same Greek word. Blessed are the poor.

Slander

Then, on top of that, they would also face slanderous speech against them. The implication is that the church in Smyrna was constantly receiving claims and accusations against them. It could be in the form of blasphemy. It could just be speaking ill of them. Ironically, the claim was that they were atheists because they wouldn't worship the gods of Rome. So there's some irony in that sense. But they were receiving these slanderous threats against them because of their distinctiveness. They were refusing to engage in the worship of the time, and therefore, the downstream effect was a life riddled with affliction.

One of the things that we need to be conscious of in our present moment as we read something like this, particularly in the evangelical stream, is the tendency to equate disagreement with persecution. These are two different things. We are too quick, as the modern church, to assume persecution, particularly in our context. Sometimes, we're just on the receiving end of people disagreeing with us. That's okay. We live in a plural society where various worldviews are going to exist, and we will, at times, be at odds with that.

One of the truths is that the more we faithfully follow Jesus, the more we will do two things. We will attract people and repel people. We shouldn't be too quick to assume persecution. In Acts 2, as the early church was getting their footing, right there in the very beginning, it says that they enjoyed the favor of all people.

Now, in Acts 2, they were living in a pagan context similar to Smyrna. They were still living in a context that disagreed a lot with what they believed and how they carried themselves, but, somehow, they did it in such a way that they enjoyed the favor of all people. People, meaning that all people of different stripes and different beliefs, still found their lives, what Peter would say, as beautiful.

Think of 1 Peter 2:12. "Live such good lives among the pagans," which by the way, pagan just means non-Jew. We think of it more in a derogatory term. Don't think of it that way when you

read the New Testament. But in 1 Peter 2:12 it says, *"Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us."*

Part of what it means to exist as a distinct people is that there is such a way that we are aimed toward love, that people will be attracted to that love. You care for people across differences. You help cover their needs. You are in relationship with people who are broken, who are on different social strata than you.

So, there was an attractiveness to the early church that people were drawn to. At the same time, our distinctiveness will repel people from us at times. There are our beliefs and ways in which we live and hold ourselves as followers of Jesus that will put us in contrast to the world around us. That will be natural as well. There were many people who would see this community of faith, and just like the church in Smyrna, would actually run the other direction.

One of the litmus tests for us is if you are living in such a way that everyone always agrees with you, may I kindly suggest that you might not be living faithfully to the way of Jesus. We will, in fact, be distinct from the culture around us. At the same time, if everyone around you always thinks you're just a jerk, may I suggest that you might be a jerk? It might just be that you are also not following Jesus because you are not holding the tension and upholding the dignity of the other. That's the tension we live in, particularly in our cultural moment.

Absolutely, you will curry favor with everyone around you, and at times you will also repel people away. Lord, have mercy on us. May we simply, humbly hold the quiet faith Paul described to the Thessalonians to make it their ambition to lead a quiet life. We need people who live quiet lives of faith, who work diligently with their hands. He would go on to say that this is a prophetic call for us in the church, to make it our ambition to faithfully follow Jesus in a noisy age. May it be so in us, back to the text.

"I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan" (v. 9b). I need to call this out because there's a way of reading this that feels very antisemitic. It feels like it comes against the Jewish people, but what we often forget is that John was a Jew writing to fellow Jews who now believed in the Messiah, Jesus. The political nature of the Jewish religion at the time was that there was a schism brewing between those who confessed to Jesus as the Christ and those who didn't.

Often, Satan would come in and cause all sorts of division within that. That's what most of the New Testament is written about, is how to heal the division that had entered into the people of God. So when he says this, remember it's insider language. It's one Jew writing to other Jews. Don't read that and think antisemitism. That has no place in the way of Jesus. Absolutely not.

And that's not what this text is talking about. Now let's move on to verse 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 life as your victor's crown. Revelation 2:10

Jesus knows what's coming for this church. He knows the circumstances in which they will feel that persecution, and here he gives the most frequent command in all of scriptures, "Do not be afraid." Jesus knows what's going to happen, but he regularly gives this command. And then notice the way, this is important, that the testing comes not from God, but from the devil, the accuser, the enemy, the deceiver. The deception that the devil would go about doing in the midst of pain and suffering is to question the goodness of God.

This is different from lament. Lament has a very proper place in the life of a believer. To cry out and say, "Lord, how long?" The Psalms are littered with lament, but Jesus is saying that the testing comes not from God, but from the devil.

And then there's this weird illusion to ten days. Why so specific? He'll test you for ten days. In Revelation, we don't look forward to interpret the book. Just like every other book, we look backwards to ask where else was someone persecuted for ten days? Most biblical scholars would suggest that the ten days of suffering here is a hyperlink all the way back to the Book of Daniel. Daniel and his three friends were persecuted for ten days. It's the same thing. It's Jesus saying, "Hey, remember that story of that kid, Daniel? Hold on like he held on." You'll experience persecution, but it will relent.

One of the most beautiful things about the story of Daniel is that God's presence throughout his suffering was constant. It was always there. Jesus is telling them that the suffering will come. In fact, you will experience it for a season, but his command is to be faithful, even to the point of death. He says, *"I will give you life as your victor's crown."*

Notice the reward that Jesus places before them isn't the crown. You have to read it closely, but it's that he will give them life. The victor's crown is the metaphor. In Smyrna, they had all sorts of athletic competitions in which the victor would be given a crown. He's drawing on that imagery because here's the thing, the victory, the reward out there for a life of faithfulness is not some mansion or crown or whatever material thing you could think of. It's life with Jesus himself. That is the treasure, and that is something that cannot be taken away, no matter the circumstances. He says to be faithful even to the point of death because he will give you life. You'll experience life with him, and that is far greater than the victor's crown.

"Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death" (v. 11). Jesus is looking out over the horizon. He's saying there is coming a time in which this present age will pass away and the new creation will come. He says that in that time, where all bad things are done away with, where all death is finished, you will not be harmed by that second death. You will enter into that new creation, the eternal life that they can experience right in the midst of their world.

Did you know that Smyrna is the exact same word as the noun, myrrh, as in gold, frankincense, and myrrh? Smyrna and myrrh are the same word. The reason I point that out is because myrrh is an extremely costly oil. It emits a beautiful fragrance. It was used to both anoint people and embalm people in death. We know about myrrh because it bookends the life of Jesus.

At the very beginning of the story, what we just celebrated through the Christmas season are the kings who brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They were anointing Jesus as the new king. And at the end of his life, Joseph and Nicodemus go and bury Jesus and embalm him in myrrh, hearkening back to his birth, where his birth was pointing towards his death.

The only way you get the fragrance out of myrrh is by crushing it, and as you crush it, this beautiful fragrance is emitted. It's a powerful image because Jesus says, "I am the first and the last. The one who died and was raised. The one who was crushed and yet emitted a beautiful fragrance." One of the things built into the very name and history of this church is this idea that you will be crushed. That's unavoidable. But you will emit a beautiful fragrance, like the life of Jesus, if you hold faithful.

So a good question for us is what fragrance do we emit when we experience affliction? We will all be pressed. That's undeniable. Romans 8 makes that clear. The second law of thermodynamics makes that clear; entropy is constant. An isolated system, over time, will give way to disorder. It's what is experienced all throughout the world. It's what we've acutely experienced this week in our world. We've experienced the brokenness on a broad scale.

My guess is some of you are also feeling that affliction in a very personal way. You're being pressed in. The life of Jesus is a witness to us that in the midst of creation, groaning and aching and following apart, the fragrance that was emitted from Jesus' life was the life of love. So much so that he hung on the cross, feeling that affliction. But what comes out is what naturally came out of his life, always forgiveness and grace. "Lord, forgive them, they know not what they do." Those are the words that are crushed out of Jesus.

What is the fragrance that you emit? Is it the fragrance of complaint, of anger? Maybe it's in the opposite direction, pleasure and escapism. Where you're just trying to escape the circumstances,

all of those are natural. I don't say those things to bring shame upon you, but is there a different way? Is there a different path forward when we feel that affliction? Because affliction is unavoidable. Creation is growing. You are either coming out of a season of suffering, in one, or going into one.

I recognize that is a pretty cynical view of the world, but it's just been my lived experience. Affliction is always there, but notice Jesus words, "You are poor and yet you are rich." If this is the inevitability of life, there is, in fact, a way to go through this where you experience life in a different way. Jesus' response to this church isn't a stern "be faithful," but a gentle encouragement to be faithful. There's life on the other side of this. There's life in the midst of it. There's life present right among it.

Suffering is never caused by God. I do not believe that. It's a misreading of Romans 8, in my opinion, but rather it provides the opportunity for God to use that suffering. That's what Romans 8 is talking about. It is groaning. God does not cause that, but he will always use it to deepen our souls. What happens when that myrrh is crushed is that it exposes what was always there beneath it. When the devil tests us, what happens is our souls open up, and we find what's in there.

If complaint and anger are the natural thing that constantly flows from your life, Jesus wants to liberate you from that. He wants to cultivate a life of love within you. Suffering is the inevitable reality of sin in all of its facets. It is not the consequence, necessarily, of the sin that we do. It can be that sometimes, when we sin, we reap consequences that produce suffering. Often, it is sin that is done to us by others in a broken world, or it is simply sin done around us. But some combination of sin done by us, to us, or around us is what brings about suffering. But the beautiful story and the hope that we hold is that Jesus uses all of that brokenness and somehow transforms it for our good and invites us into a deeper life.

Do you realize the church in Ephesus, which we looked back on last week, was living under the exact same circumstances as Smyrna? They were just about 30 miles apart and were facing the same persecution. What were Jesus' words for them? You've lost your first love. You've grown cold.

Did you notice in this letter that there were no words of critique for this church? Jesus, with such care and love, comes alongside this suffering church and simply says to just continue to be faithful. "I'm with you. I see you. I, too, have walked that road. I know you, and I too died." Tim Keller wrote,

Christianity teaches that, contra fatalism, suffering is overwhelming; contra Buddhism, suffering is real; contra karma, suffering is often unfair; but contra secularism, suffering is meaningful. There is a purpose to it, and if faced rightly, it can drive us like a nail deep into the love of God and into more stability and spiritual power than you can

imagine. Keller, Walking with God through Pain and Suffering

We don't think of suffering in those terms. We don't think of it as an opportunity for us to be driven deeper into the love of God. Because partly we've been shaped by a secular worldview that says pleasure is the highest good, and so therefore all suffering must be avoided. It also doesn't mean you seek out suffering. I don't mean it in that sense.

The difference of the Christian worldview, the difference of the story of Jesus is that he entered into suffering knowing its inevitability, and somehow in the midst of that, God takes it and uses it to deepen our experience of his love. Many times, it's not in the moment of suffering that you feel driven deep into the love of God, but ask anyone who has walked with Jesus for a long time. The moments in their life that they look back to are always moments of suffering.

I've talked with many people who have followed Jesus longer than I've been alive, and when they share their stories, the ones they go back to are the stories of pain and hurt. Maybe in that moment they didn't see it, but as they walked that long, dark night of the soul, that lonely road, they came to the other side, looked back and realized they too had been driven deep into the love of God. It is a radically different understanding of suffering than really any other worldview.

Suffering can be the engine of growth, the engine of a deepening of the soul. It has always been the paradox of the Christian faith. It's in our weakness that we are made strong. It's a fundamental paradox that from death, somehow, comes life. Look at this from 2 Corinthians 12, Paul speaking.

Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, or because of these surpassingly great revelations. Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. 2 Corinthians 12:6-10

This is so counter to what we understand of the world. The world teaches this perspective of overcoming, of being more powerful, of triumphing over everything. Yet the road toward growth and the grace that is sufficient is a descent. It's naming the weakness, of deepening into that, and somehow, in some unknown way, we allow Christ to be made strong in us. Paul in Philippians

would say, "I want to be united with Jesus' death, so somehow, mysteriously, I can experience the resurrection."

So how do we walk through this? There are four words that are really important for us to take from this text because suffering is never easy. You see the tension right there in Paul, but there are four words that are mentioned in this text that we need to hold to. They are, I know, and I died. Jesus knows what this church is going through.

I Know

The prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 53 would say this of Jesus. *"He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem"* (Isaiah 53:3). I don't know what affliction you're going through, but the thing I can be most certain of is that Jesus has walked that road.

Notice also that Jesus, when he says, "I know your affliction," doesn't leave it in the abstract but rather names the particular affliction that was going on in the church of Smyrna. Jesus knows the affliction that you're walking through. Don't get caught in the deism trap that God is some distant being who is somewhere far away. He knows your suffering. He knows your affliction.

I Died

Even more so, he died. Not only does he know it as in head knowledge, but he is also intimately acquainted with it. A man of sorrows, one who has walked the full experience of the human life through death itself. What we often think of is that we need a powerful God to champion over those things. God is those things, don't hear me wrong, but what we also need, in a world where suffering and brokenness are inevitable, is a God who can bleed. We need a God who cried out, "Where are you? My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" We need the God of power, of which Jesus is, and we need the God who knows affliction, of which Jesus is. He is both of those things. He is both empathetic to your struggle and powerful enough to say, "You died, but you will come to life. You will walk through that." Keller, later in that same book that I mentioned, wrote,

While other worldviews lead us to sit in the midst of life's joys, foreseeing the coming sorrows, Christianity empowers its people to sit in the midst of this world's sorrows, tasting the coming joy... Suffering is unbearable if you aren't certain that God is for you and with you. Keller

May I emphatically remind you that God is for you. He's with you.

Polycarp was a man who lived from the year 69 to 156 and became the Bishop of Smyrna. He received the original version of the letter to the church in Smyrna. Since he was a child, he was a follower of Jesus. He lived under the Roman Empire, and his generation was the first post-New Testament generation of

the church. As far as church history goes, it was one of the most formative eras for the church as it was making that jump from literally John to the next generation.

Tradition tells us that Polycarp was likely discipled by John himself, one of the original disciples. At the age of 86, the Roman Empire issued a warrant for his arrest under the charges of sedition, refusal to worship Caesar, and atheism. Of course, the charge of atheism was his rejection of the Roman Gods, not of Yahweh.

He held quite tight to his relationship with God. Upon hearing of his impending arrest, instead of fleeing, although he originally ran a little bit, he didn't flee entirely, Polycarp went home and awaited his arresters. His home was quickly flooded with friends, pleading with him to escape, and yet he refused.

The authorities, having eventually discovered the whereabouts of Polycarp, came to his door and took him into custody. On their way to the court, he was encouraged by these authorities to just confess that Caesar is Lord, and it would all be over. Polycarp knew what was coming for him. He knew that the punishment was death. The situation escalated, and the soldiers began to express their threats. Then, eventually, he was taken into an arena filled with people to watch him die. Then this famous dialogue took place in which Polycarp says:

"Eighty-Six years I have served him [Jesus], and he never did me any wrong. How can I blasphemy my king who saved me?" The proconsul responded. **"I have wild beasts. I shall throw you to them if you do not change your mind."** Polycarp answered, **"Call them then, for we are not accustomed to repenting of what is good in order to adopt that which is evil, and it is well for me to be changed from what is evil to what is righteous."** The proconsul responded, **"I will cause you to be consumed by fire, seeing you despise the wild beast, if you will not repent."** To which Polycarp replied, **"You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour, and after a little is extinguished, but are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment reserved for the ungodly. But why do you tarry? Bring forth what you will."**

He was burned at the stake, but didn't die from that, and was stabbed to death right there in that arena. You know one of the beautiful truths about Polycarp's story? If you go to Izmir, where the church of Smyrna was, there is still a remnant of the church in the wake of Polycarp.

"Be faithful even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown." There is a way to hold together the tension of

deep pain and expectant hope. Somehow, in the lives of so many believers before us, they have walked that way. I don't know what your affliction is, but I can be confident that Jesus is trying to get your attention to say, "I see you. I'm with you, and I'm making all things new." May that be our prayer.