

“Be Faithful unto Death” (Rev. 2:8–11)

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I want to start with a big question: What would you be willing to die for?

Some people recently have claimed they would be willing to die for a politician, a politician who would not die for them.

Others have died for their country. When you enlist in the military, you realize that death is a possibility. During some wars, men were drafted to serve in the military, and though they may not have chosen to fight for their country, some died for that cause.

Others have died for the cause of civil rights.

Some have died for far less noble causes. According to one study, between October 2011 and November 2017, 259 people across the globe died while taking “selfies”—pictures of themselves. Some people fell, drowned, were electrocuted, burned by fire, hit by trains, or involved in a car crash while trying to get that perfect shot.¹

What would you be willing to die for?

What we’re willing to die for reveals what we think is most important. So, what do you think is most important?

There have been many Christians over the last two millennia who have thought that their faith is so important, they were willing to die rather than deny their faith in Jesus. One early martyr was a man named Ignatius, who was bishop in the city of Antioch in Syria. We don’t know much about him, but at the end of the first century or beginning of the second century he was arrested and was condemned to death. He was taken from Antioch to Rome, where he would die. Along the way, he stopped in Asia Minor, in a city called Smyrna. From there, he wrote messages to seven churches.

This is how Ignatius began his letter to the church in Smyrna:

I glorify Jesus Christ, the God who made you so wise, for I observed that you are established in an unshakable faith, having been nailed, as it were, to the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ in both body and spirit, and firmly established in love by the blood of Christ, totally convinced with regard to our Lord that he is truly of the family of David with respect to human descent, Son of God with respect to the

¹ Agam Bansal, Chandan Garg, Abhijith Pakhare, Samiksha Gupta, “Selfies: A Boon or Bane?” *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care* 7, no. 4 (2018): 828–831, <https://www.jfmpc.com/article.asp?issn=2249-4863;year=2018;volume=7;issue=4;spage=828;epage=831;aulast=Bansal>.

divine will and power, truly born of a virgin, baptized by John in order that all righteousness might be fulfilled by him, (2) truly nailed in the flesh for us under Pontius Pilate and Herod the tetrarch (from its [the cross's] fruit we derive our existence, that is, from his divinely blessed suffering), in order that he might raise a banner for the ages through his resurrection for his saints and faithful people, whether among Jews or among Gentiles, in the one body of his church.

For he suffered all these things for our sakes, in order that we might be saved.²

Ignatius knew that just as Jesus had suffered, he would suffer. He thought he would be thrown to the lions in Rome, so he wrote, “Let me be food for the wild beasts, through whom I can reach God. I am God’s wheat, and I am being ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I might prove to be pure bread.”³ He didn’t shy away from dying for his faith in Jesus.

Ignatius also wrote to a younger Christian leader, the bishop of Smyrna named Polycarp. Among the things he told Polycarp was this: “Stand firm, like an anvil being struck with a hammer. It is the mark of a great athlete to be bruised, yet still conquer.”⁴ He knew that Polycarp would face conflict from non-Christians, and he wanted him to remain firm in the faith in spite of those who would be against him.

Years later, in 155, Polycarp was arrested for refusing to worship the Roman gods. Polycarp was asked to pay homage to Caesar, the Roman Emperor. He was asked to call him Lord. But Polycarp knew that Jesus was the true Lord, and he refused. Eusebius, an early historian of the church, writes about what happened next:

And when the governor pressed him and said: “Swear, and I shall release you: revile Christ,” Polycarp said: “For eighty-six years have I served Him, and He has done me no wrong, and how can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” And when he again persisted and said: “Swear by the genius of Caesar,” he said, “If you vainly suppose that I shall swear by the genius of Caesar, as you say, pretending not to know who I am, hear openly: I am a Christian. And if you wish to learn the doctrine of Christianity, name the day and listen.”⁵

Polycarp confessed being a Christian. He refused to renounce Jesus. And because of that, he was burned to death.

² Michael William Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, Updated ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 185.

³ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁵ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History, Books 1–5*, ed. and trans. Roy Joseph Deferrari, vol. 19, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1953), 237–238.

I bring up the issue of dying for Jesus because Jesus himself brings up the issue in a message to the church in that same city of Smyrna. We'll look at his message to them this morning in Revelation 2:8–11.

Here is just a brief reminder of where we are in the book of Revelation. In chapter 1, we saw that John, an early Jewish Christian, was exiled on the island of Patmos, off the western coast of what is now known as Turkey, but what was then known as Asia Minor. While John was worshipping on a Sunday, the Lord's Day, Jesus appeared to him a vision. John describes this vision of Jesus, which is delivered in symbolic language. Jesus is the beginning and the end, the Alpha and Omega, the one who died and came back to life. He is God, he is King, and he is the Judge before whom everyone will stand one day. Jesus is also the High Priest of his churches. And Jesus told John to send messages to seven particular churches in Asia Minor. This morning, we'll look at the message to the church in Smyrna.

This church is only one of two that Jesus commends without any word of correction. This church was faithful, and Jesus encouraged them to be faithful to the end.

So, without further ado, let's read Revelation 2:8–11:

⁸“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.

⁹“I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

¹⁰Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.”⁶

Each of these messages begins with a description of Jesus that we already encountered in chapter 1. Here, Jesus reminds the church that he is the first and last, which is to say that before anything, Jesus has always existed as the Son of God, and long after everything that so worries us passes away, Jesus will continue to exist. Only God can be said to be the first and last (Isa. 41:4; 44:6; 48:12). It's important that Jesus remind them that he is divine and that he is in control.

It's also important that Jesus reminds them that he knows what it is like to die and to rise again from the dead. The central confession of Christianity is that Jesus is the Son of God who

⁶ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

became a human being to rescue sinners from condemnation. All of us were made to know God, to love him, and to worship him. But all of us have ignored God, neglected him, failed to love him, and disobeyed his commands. Since we failed to do what God had planned for us to do, God himself comes to do the job. The Son of God became a human being, like us in every way except that he had never sinned. He always loved God perfectly. He always loved other people perfectly. And yet he was treated as a criminal, an enemy of the state. He was executed on a cross, an instrument of torture and death. This was because some people, such as the Jewish religious leaders, didn't believe Jesus taught the truth about God. He also died because the Roman ruler of the area, Pontius Pilate, wanted to retain peace in Jerusalem instead of getting to the truth of the matter. But this was ultimately God's plan: Jesus died to pay the penalty that we deserve for our sins. We deserve death—and more than just physical death, we deserve what is called here the “second death,” a final and irreversible condemnation that results in existing forever in hell. But Jesus endured hell on earth when he died on the cross, so that all who believe in him have already had their sins punished. They are forgiven by God, adopted into his family, and given the promise that though they will die in this life, they will live with God forevermore.

Christians will live with God forever because they will be raised back to life in immortal, indestructible bodies. And the reason we know we will have such bodies is that Jesus already rose from the grave in such a body. Jesus not only died, but he rose from the grave, triumphing over sin and death. Jesus' resurrection was the first installment, a down payment, of a future resurrection to come.

So, Jesus reminds this church that there is life after death. He died and came back to life. That's important for them to remember.

Then Jesus says, “I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.” To understand the kind of tribulation that the church in Smyrna experienced, it's important to know something about this city. It is now called Izmir, a major city. Back then, it was a center of the worship of the Roman Emperor. As strange as it sounds, the emperors of Rome were regarded as divine. A temple to Emperor Tiberias, who was the emperor when Jesus was crucified, was built in Smyrna. There were also temples to other gods, such as the god Zeus and the goddesses Roma and Cybele. Like other cities in the Roman Empire, Smyrna was full of idols, and there would have been great pressure put on Christians to worship these false gods.

Smyrna also had a large Jewish population, and it seems that the Jews who were not Christians in that city were slandering Christians. Jews in the Roman Empire had a measure of freedom. They were not forced to worship the emperor or the other gods of Rome. And Christianity grew out of the root of Judaism, but there was a division. Though Jesus and his disciples were Jewish, not all Jews believed. So, the unbelieving Jews separated themselves from the Christians. And these Jews told the Romans that they were not with this new Jesus sect. The Romans had begun to view Christians with suspicion, and the non-Christian Jews didn't want anything to do with that. So, they let the Romans know they weren't Christians and that Christians weren't really Jews. We see this in the book of Acts. For example, in Acts 17, while the apostle Paul was in the city of Thessalonica, Jews who rejected Jesus became angry with his preaching, and they brought another Christian named Jason before the city officials. They claimed that Christians were saying there was another king besides Caesar. Later, in Acts 18, when Paul was in Corinth, some Jewish people there tried to do something similar. They said to the city officials, "This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law" (Acts 18:13).

It is likely that the non-Christian Jews in Smyrna slandered the Christians in that city. And for that reason, Jesus says that these Jews belong to the "synagogue of Satan," the devil. Now, it would be easy for some people to claim that this is anti-Semitic language. But think about this: Jesus, a Jewish man (who also happens to be the God-man) is telling John, another Jewish man, to write this message. The early Christians were Jews. So, it's rather ridiculous to claim that this message is anti-Semitic. It is clearly directed at some, but not all, Jews. Also, it's in line with what Jesus says in the Gospels about Jews who couldn't see that he was the Son of God. Jesus calls them a "brood of vipers" (Matt. 12:34; 23:33). He also says that their father is the devil (John 8:44). Of course, Jesus doesn't mean that literally. But what Jesus is indicating is that not all Jewish people are God's people. But that's not anti-Semitic. The Bible says that not all people, period, are God's people. This is not picking on Jewish people, and it's certainly not saying that they are worse than other people. All people, Jew and Gentile, are made in God's image, and all people start out life outside the family of God. All people need salvation, but not all will put their trust in Jesus.

This message is also clearly found in other parts of the New Testament. In Romans 2, the apostle Paul says that those who are truly circumcised, which was a physical mark of being a Jew

(at least for the men), are those who have received the Holy Spirit (Rom. 2:28–29). In other words, those who have been transformed by the power of God are marked out as God’s people. The same reality is expressed in Philippians, which Paul wrote to an audience that consisted mostly of Gentiles. He said to them, “For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh” (Phil. 3:3).

The true Jewish person is Jesus. And those who are truly Israel, the people of God, are those who are united to faith in Jesus, the true Israelite. They are God’s people.

Jesus wanted these Christians in Smyrna to know that what was happening to them was not the work of some unbelieving Jews. Behind them was the devil, Satan, who was trying to attack God’s people in that city. But Jesus says this: “Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.” Jesus said these Christians would suffer. The Bible is clear about this: God has never promised us an easy life. He said that the devil was about to throw them into prison. But notice this: the purpose of this suffering, this persecution, was to test them. Satan wanted to tear these people away from God. But God’s purpose for this event was to test the faith of these Christians. If they were willing to suffer for Jesus, that would prove that their faith was real. That is what persecution does: It shows to everyone that the faith of the persecuted is real. It shows to those who are being persecuted that they have real faith. It shows to those who are persecuting them that they have real faith. God brings good things out of persecution.

Jesus also tells them that this tribulation would be short. They would be thrown into prison for “ten days.” As with the other numbers in the book of Revelation, this number is likely symbolic. Daniel and his friends were tested for ten days when they were exiled in Babylon (Dan. 1:12–15). Christians in Smyrna would also be tested. It’s Jesus’ way of saying that their imprisonment will be short; it won’t last forever. Their tribulation will be real, but it will be limited.

So, Jesus tells them to be faithful, even unto death. Jesus knows that there are worse things than death. Jesus died and rose from the grave. If Christians die in the faith, they are conquerors, and they will receive the crown of life.

As I’ve said before, we conquer the devil and death not through our own strength, or through putting all the bad guys to death. We conquer by clinging to Jesus, trusting him even in

persecution and tribulation, being willing to die before renouncing our faith. Later in the book of Revelation, Christians are described as defeating Satan by clinging to the gospel. Revelation 12:11 says, “And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.” We can conquer because Jesus conquered death and sin through his death. He was the Lamb sacrificed for sin. If death cannot destroy Jesus, then it cannot destroy Christians.

Opposition to Jesus and his people has existed from the beginning, but it can never defeat Christianity. I am reminded of a passage from C. S. Lewis’s great book, *Mere Christianity*:

Again and again it [the world] has thought Christianity was dying, dying by persecutions from without and corruptions from within, by the rise of Mohammedanism [Islam], the rise of the physical sciences, the rise of great anti-Christian revolutionary movements. But every time the world has been disappointed. Its first disappointment was over the crucifixion. The Man came to life again. In a sense—and I quite realise how frightfully unfair it must seem to them—that has been happening ever since. They keep on killing the thing that He started: and each time, just as they are patting down the earth on its grave, they suddenly hear that it is still alive and has even broken out in some new place. No wonder they hate us.⁷

Empires have come and come. The Roman Empire has long been forgotten. And who among us can name more than a couple of Roman emperors? Other empires have come and gone. But Christianity endures. A poor man, Jesus of Nazareth, continues to draw followers, for these followers realize he is not a mere man, but the King of kings and the Son of God.

Yet not everyone embraces Jesus. People still hate him because he is Lord. They don’t want there to be a cosmic authority who sets the terms for their lives. So, they rage against God, and they rage against God’s people, who serve as a reminder that there is a greater power than the government. People don’t like these truth claims of an ultimate King, and since they first hate that King, it is not surprise they hate his people.

Yet no one can separate God’s people from God. No one can separate Christians from Christ. Though Christians may die for the faith, that death can not ultimately hurt them. Just as Jesus rose from the grave after being put to death, Christians will one day rise. And just as Jesus rose in a body that can never die again, so will Christians. One day, they will inherit the earth. Whatever persecution we face will be short, but glory will be forever.

⁷ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 222.

Jesus ends his message to this church with these words, in verse 11: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.” At the end of the book of Revelation, we are given an image of a day of judgment, when all will stand before the throne of Jesus to be judged (Rev. 20:11–15). There will be two kinds of people on that day. There will be people who will be judged according to their works. These are the people who have rejected Jesus, who have shrugged their shoulders at him and denied him. God knows all that they have done, and all the evidence will be before him. And we’re told that those people will be cast out. They will not enter into a new creation that is coming, a beautiful new world in which there is no evil, no sin, and no death. These people will be cast into a lake of fire, where they will receive a second death, eternal condemnation.

Jesus says that those who hear what he says, those who conquer by believing in him, will not be harmed by that second death. They are the ones who will be judged based on Jesus’ work, on his moral perfection and his atoning death on their behalf.

It has been said that either you will be born twice and die once, or you will be born once and die twice. The idea is that we all, of course, are born. But those who are born again of the Spirit (John 3:1–8) will only die once, the first death that all face. Those who are not born again of the Spirit, those who do not come to Christ, will die a first death, and later the second death. However, I once heard someone say that we will all die twice. Some of us will put to death our old selves when we come to Jesus, and we will also die that first death. Others will refuse to put our sinful selves to death, and we will die the first and second deaths. So, the difference isn’t just whether we will be born again, but whether we will repent. Really, these are two sides of the same coin.

The true test of whether we have to come to Jesus is whether we are willing to suffer for him. We don’t have people now saying to us in this country, “Renounce Jesus or you will be put to death!” But we might have people treat us in ways that suggest that we should renounce Jesus or we’ll lose our job, or not get this promotion, or lose that friend, or not be considered part of the in crowd.

There’s a line in William Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, spoken by Caesar, that is brilliant. It says:

Cowards die many times before their deaths;
The valiant never taste of death but once.⁸

The idea is that the brave person, the valiant, only faces one death, while the coward dies many little deaths because he is afraid. Every time he fails to stand up for what is right, he dies a little. Will we be brave and stand up for Jesus, or will we die many times over?

My encouragement to us all is to think about what we are willing to die for. For those who are not yet Christians, what is it that you would die for? What kind of person are you willing to be? Will you live and die for trivial things like selfies? What cause will you spend your life on? Would you consider living and dying for Jesus because he laid down his life for all who follow him? No politician, no entertainer, no athlete, no celebrity would do that for you. And not even your family and friends can do that to save your soul from that second death. Turn to Jesus today, put to death your old way of living, and you never need to fear death again.

Christians, are you willing to die for Jesus? If you were to crumble when persecution comes, it is because you never treasured Jesus in the first place. Think about whether you are willing to die for him. If you are, you will be awarded the crown of life, and that second death cannot harm you.

⁸ William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, II.ii.1008–1009.