



LETTERS OF LENT

Smyrna | Wk. 2

March 3, 2024

[Worship Music Playlist](#)

Prelude – Your Love Is Strong by Jon Foreman

WELCOME (cards & community) |

Good morning, all! I'm so glad we can gather together this morning as the church. **To come together on this day made for us, a day where we awoke into the light of our Father's rest**—a day for us to rest in God with us, God for us. Today is a day to set our mind's attention and heart's affection upon Jesus, our Light, and Life so that we might *be the church*, spiritual companions in gospel community, following Jesus together in our ordinary roles and relationships.

To be the church, that's the aim of our worship together, remembering whose and who we are in Jesus and the life he calls us into (makes us ready for). So, for those new with us, we are glad you're here, and **we'd like to invite you to church** and *into the relationships that make the church indeed a faith family through Jesus*.

We'd also like to invite you to put your trust in God with us amid the ups and downs of life. And live a life of trust, because of the life we have received. **Will you pray with me?**

CALL TO WORSHIP | Psalm 56:1-4, 10-13

Be gracious to me, O God, for man tramples on me; all day long an attacker oppresses me; my enemies trample on me all day long, for many attack me proudly. When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me? In God, whose word I praise, in the Lord, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me? I must perform my vows to you, O God; I will render thank offerings to you. For you have delivered my soul from death, yes, my feet from falling, that I may walk before God in the light of life.

Song #1 – You Are With Me by Leslie Jordan

Song #2 – Draw Me In by Zach/Traditional

Dismiss Kids

CALL BACK & ANNOUNCEMENTS | Guy's Night, Ben & Lent

Guy's Night SLIDE— Saturday, March 9th @ Jesse's. RSVP to Dylan

Many of you know Ben Mayer, but not everyone. And those who do know Ben may have yet to learn exactly what Ben has been/is going through. We wanted to share a way to find that out so that you can help in prayer and, if led, give. **[GoFundMe SLIDE]**

Today, we continue our Lenten journey together. A pilgrimage to Easter morning that takes us to and through the cross of Christ, Jesus dying so that His death might become our death and His life after death be our lives as well. It's in the light of the historical reality of Christ on the cross and in the tomb, and Christ alive and enthroned, that the Lenten road exposes us. Our lives are viewed in the light of Jesus, examined through the sight of Jesus, encouraged, admonished, and invited into more of His life through Jesus' words. And when I say "us," I mean you and I together. The words of Jesus in the Revelation are not to individuals, but to the gathered, the gospel communities, spiritual companions in particular places attempting (like you and me) to live loyally to Jesus (honoring his person and purposes, living in step with his way, his truth, his life), and like us, doing so with varying degrees of consistency.

So, as a church like the churches of the Revelation, let us listen to the words of Jesus as words to us so that we, like them, might live fully and forever with Jesus. Pray with me.

PRE-SERMON READING | Revelation 2:8-11

"And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: 'These things says the ONE who is the first and the last, who died and came to life. " '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. 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. 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.'

SERMON |

In our preparation for Lent, we said that “salvation” the restoring of right relationship not only between God and us, but us and us, us and our world, and so not just our individual salvation, but the righteousness of community arrives through a life lived in kind to the life given for us, given to us...our lives made right through his actions and our lives lived loyally to (in honor of and aligned with the intent of) that life given for us.

Each of the seven letters of Jesus speaks to the loyalty of that particular congregation to the life they've received from Jesus. Encouraging where they are walking in step with his person and purpose, pointing out where their steps are out of alignment and promising more of himself, more of his life as they continue, conquer, in faith. That's the pattern in every letter.

THE PATTERN

- Relationship Acknowledged
- Identity in Jesus
- Encouragement
- Admonishment
- Promise through Jesus

So, let's talk through the context and pattern in the letter to Smyrna.

Smyrna was a city reborn in splendor. In 600 b.c., the city was destroyed by Lydia and existed as a collection of villages for nearly 300 years until Alexander the Great commissioned its rebuilding. Through the authority and power behind this commanded rebirth, Smyrna became one of the first planned cities of the ancient world and thus architecturally exquisite and advanced.

Smyrna was famous for its temples to Zeus and Cybele, which capped either end of a great mall that was the ancient world's envy. This group of expertly designed and magnificently maintained buildings was known as “the crown of Smyrna,” as it sat atop the city's highest ridge. Encircling this stunning coalescence like a jeweled necklace was a beautiful roadway called “the Street of Gold.”¹ No city could compare.

Not only was the city designed to be beautiful, but its natural features added to its reputation. Surrounding the city were groves of trees that produced an aromatic gum called myrrh, that same myrrh brought by the wise men from the East to Jesus' feet. Capped by the crowned ridge, surrounded by groves of precious trees, and sitting on idyllic waters that cooled the city during the hot summer months, Smyrna was truly a paradise. Add to the visual splendor that Smyrna claimed to be the birthplace of the famed Greek poet Homer, and thus a center for thought and creativity, and it is easy to imagine the beauty of the world holding no more excellent representation.

Like Ephesus, Smyrna was a free city, free because of its distinction as Rome's most *loyal* city.

Even before Rome had risen to absolute power, Smyrna threw in its lot with the soon-to-be empire. It “maintained an excellent relationship with Rome and was one of four cities...to host the provincial assembly. It

¹ G.R. Osborne, *Revelation*, 127.

was the first city in Asia to erect a temple to the goddess Roma (195 b.c.). In a.d. 26, because of its long loyalty to Rome, it beat out ten other cities for the privilege of building a temple to the emperor Tiberias. In succeeding decades, [about the time of Jesus' address] it became a center of the imperial cult."² The details of daily living (work, municipal services, and faith/religion) were one in Smyrna. Politics, religion, and economy formed a three-corded strand that is not easily broken. In this marvelous metropolis, everyone "wanted to exalt Smyrna and had a personal desire to climb to the top of the municipal tree."³ Everyone played the game, well, almost everyone.

After Jesus acknowledges the human and divine relationship with his church, "And to the angel of Smyrna write..." (v. 8), Jesus always "introduces himself with a description from [chapter 1's] vision **that most suits the situation of [that specific faith family].**"⁴

The Ephesian church was a protector of Jesus, at least his words if not always in his way. A people who felt like they had to fight to uphold Jesus amongst a plethora of options, to uphold the church as distinct. If they didn't, who would? They thought their loyalty was the standard and the model for others. To the faith family of Ephesus, Jesus is the one who has them in his hands (not him in theirs), whose authority and judgment is over all the churches (not theirs), and of whom they are but one (not *the* one). Standing firm without growing weary is good, but only if it is love in which they stand. Jesus does not need your protection, though he does desire your steadfastness and loyalty because you are loved by him, and he loves even his enemies. To protect without love is to lose the very thing God who so loved the world sent the Son to die so that it might be restored.

The faith family of Smyrna was in a different spot. **They were not fighting for faith, but surviving it.** They were fighting to live. They were a people confined because of their expressed loyalty to Jesus, barred from the basics for daily living, running into afflictions at every turn of life. To this faith family, whom we know little about in origin or influence, Jesus is depicted as the utter sovereign over all life and even death. Jesus is the "first and the last, who died and came to life." (v. 8). Jesus is life itself, the One who gives life and frees from the fears of death (daily and forever) because he has defeated it.

If the Ephesians most needed love, **Smyrna's faith family needed hope.** While their loyalty was no less than the Ephesians, it was pressed differently. The Ephesians held fast to Jesus in a world full of options for something other, twisted or comingled. The Smyrnians were holding fast in a world closed off because of their commitment to Jesus' way.

In this address alone, Jesus modifies his encouragement from "I know your works..." to "I know your tribulation (compression, restriction, being squeezed) and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander (or blasphemy)" (v.9) you face. Despite their apparent lack, the fruit of their loyal labors, their sticking with Jesus and one another when it would be easier not to, is abundant.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid. 84.

⁴ G.K. Beale, *The book of Revelation: a commentary on the Greek text*, 239.

The faith family of Smyrna found themselves on the outside of everything that made Smyrna, Smyrna. The entanglement of politics, religion, and economics had created exclusive civility, requiring allegiance to Rome and her leaders to participate in even the most basic of trades within the city. If you wanted to buy and sell, craft, study, lead, i.e., make a living, loyalty to the city's politics (which was religious) was required. Otherwise, you were on the outside, confined to eke out an existence off the ladder, *unable to achieve what the culture said was the best good: prominence of citizenship (an insider, influencer, person who could get things done)*.

But here is the real kicker: while we might expect this pressure, this squeezing or tribulation, to come from those pagan Roman trade guilds and temples, the sad truth was that the pressure came from **“the Synagogue of Satan” (v.9)** from those in the city that shared a root of faith with the Jesus followers in Smyrna.

Jewish faith had a “pass” of sorts when it came to Emperor worship, that loyalty that allowed one to participate in the economics and politics of city life. They could abstain from the emperor's direct worship as the deity by pledging their fidelity to his causes. This accommodation allowed the Jews to participate in the city but retain some distinction. They were Jews in all the historical and ethnic senses, but like the Jews in Jerusalem at Jesus’ trial and execution, **they played both sides of the game**. There are, after all, ways to get ahead for God when you leverage the powers of this world—so they thought.

Like many spiritual and churched people today, many Jews in the first century were offended by Jesus’ claim that through him came freedom from sin and death—which, of course, assumed that those whom Jesus was inviting into life were dead in sin and enslaved to something other than their own wills. Rather than receive God’s rescue, they would rebel against God’s rule, just as the enemy of God himself had done.

Like the enemy who is called the accuser/blasphemer/slander throughout our scriptures, certain Smyrna Jews made it a point not merely to remove the Jesus followers from their places of worship but also to make sure the governing officials knew they were an illegal, contentious, and dangerous rabble. Their means of affliction was *slander, blasphemy* against God’s children, going as far as making up dramatic lies about the Jesus followers, claiming the way of Jesus was detrimental to the city’s good, and so disloyal to the game.

It’s important to note that while Jesus says that it is the synagogue of Satan that slanders Jesus' followers, it is **“the devil” (v. 10)** who will inflict this upcoming squeezing. **“The Devil...is the principal enemy of God and his people,”**⁵ not culture or cults or particular people—though they often work in union (knowingly or not) with the spiritual forces of evil influencing people (Eph. 6:12).

We know that Smyrna's faith family shared in Jesus’ experience of suffering. But Jesus wanted them to share too in his experience of life on the other side—by being **“faithful unto death” (v. 10)**.

Many assume that Jesus’ letter to the Smyrna church doesn’t have an admonishment, but that’s because we usually think of admonishment only in the strongest terms. But verse 10 helps us see Jesus’ warning of something to avoid: **“Don’t fear...”**

Jesus said in Matthew 5:11-12

⁵ J.L. Trafton, *Reading Revelation: a literary and theological commentary*, 35–36.

Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. **Rejoice and be glad,** for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

It sounds a lot like Jesus' words to the church of Smyrna. But notice that while Jesus can completely identify and thus empathize with the anguish and difficulty of such revile and suffering, he says *already happy* (whole, complete) are you amid the tribulation, so rejoice and be glad. Trust and don't fear; stay loyal to your "vows," as Psalm 56 encourages.

Fear, while "natural," keeps us from experiencing the fullness of what we share with Jesus when we suffer because of our loyalty (honoring his person, purposes, and manners) when we play a different game. Fear was keeping the Smyrnas from **the energy of hope** that is paradoxically ours in suffering:

we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces **hope**, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (Rom. 5:3-5)

Why should they and we not fear? Because they know *who Jesus is*—first and last, dead and come alive (sovereign)—and *what is proven in "testing."*

The reference to "ten days" of "tribulation" (v. 10) or suppression and lack is not only a reference to some specific hardship to come (and which did come several decades later and is chronicled in the martyrdom of Polycarp) but here at this moment it is a reference back to a similar difficulty of Daniel (1:8-21).

Daniel and many of his fellow educated and gifted Jewish sisters and brothers were forced to leave their homes and exiled to Babylon. Having been conquered, they were pressured to accommodate the ruling culture's collision of politics and religion to live. Already under pressure to play the game, Daniel and several of his companions *chose to be tested*. Daniel approached his steward and said, "Test your servants for ten days" (Dan. 1:12). The test was not of Daniel's faithfulness (loyalty) but came because of Daniel's faith (loyalty). Daniel and his companions, like the Smyrnians, were tested because they chose not "to defile themselves" with the entangled way of the city. Tribulation isn't chosen. Daniel did not choose to be ripped from his home, his family, or his place of faith. Tribulation isn't chosen, but it is inevitable. **Testing, comes because of faith**—out of faith already present, already demonstrated, already grounded in something sure. Testing proves what is true.

Like Daniel, the Smyrnas were being pressured to fit in, join in, play the game of the day, and accommodate Jesus' way into the way of politics, religion, and economics. **Fear** would be the thing to keep them from acting through hope as Daniel and his friends did and receiving the abundance of place (the transformative, for the salvation of the community witness) within the community that was persecuting them.

The sovereignty of Jesus defined the life of the Smyrna church, but it was the victory of Jesus that they needed to take hold. So Jesus makes two promises to those who conquer (whose lives are a loyal response in kind).

The first promise is “the crown of life,” the prize for the one who reaches the top of the ladder. Ironically, the church gets what the city and the synagogue of Satan want: a crown of civic honor and beauty⁶. They do so not by climbing the accommodation ladder but by patient endurance. Receiving the prize, not through compromise or competition or combat, but laying down their lives (the culturally and religiously acceptable way of living) to share Jesus’ life anew, different.

The second promise is freedom from fear of “the second death,” a rabbinic term that summarizes God's final judgment of humanity and divinity. There is physical death and forever death, and God is the One who is over both. But remember what Jesus says about himself in chapter 1,

Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. (Rev. 1:18)

Jesus is the One who opens and closes the door to both life’s physical ending and its forever. As Jesus said to his apprentices and all who become so,

Truly, truly I say to you, whoever hears my words and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. (John 5:24)

Jesus changes the sequence. Did you notice it? It is not that we are born then die; it is that we die then live. “That is...the reverse of what we...know. We think of life as the beginning and death as at the end...But Christ [and those sharing in his life, are] described in opposite terms.”⁷ Death is no longer an enemy to fear but a passage to life fully and forever. And there is more. Because Jesus took on death and is alive, we need not fear the stings of death in our daily living either; the daily deaths of life lived loyally differently.

“Here,” says pastor Eugene Peterson, “we have one of those paradoxes that are strewn all throughout the Christian’s life of faith. **Until [we’re willing to die like Jesus], we live neither deeply nor widely. Until we are ready to die [to the game of life for the way that is life in Jesus], we can’t live for him freely, openly, and exuberantly.**

If we spend all our energies trying to protect our interests [get everything we are conditioned to do “need”], to preserve [what we have through negotiation] and compromise with the opposition...**[to not let our faith lead to our death], we will live meagerly.**

But if we live at risk [loyally investing what we’ve been given in the way of the giver], giving up all in witness and commitment and love, we are released from death to live in the power of the Resurrection.”⁸ To live differently, in the certainty of hope.

⁶ Ibid. 37.

⁷ Eugene Peterson, *This Hallelujah Banquet: how the end of what we were reveals who we can be*, 58.

⁸ Ibid., 56-57.

DISCUSSION |

- Where/in what ways are you feeling the “squeeze” of the game?
- What’s the fear keeping you from the “bless-edness” of sure hope?

COMMUNION |

- Give instructions for group communion

Song #3 – Man of Sorrows by Ellie Holcomb

Song #4 – Christ Our Hope in Life and Death by Getty/Papa

BENEDICTION | Romans 5:1-5

As we rest in the day made for us, we prepare to enter into the work for which we are made [**LIGHT THE CANDLE**], remembering:

By entering through faith into what God has always wanted to do for us—set us right with him, make us fit for him—we have it all together with God because of our Master Jesus. And that’s not all: We throw open our doors to God and discover at the same moment that he has already thrown open his door to us. We find ourselves standing where we always hoped we might stand—out in the wide open spaces of God’s grace and glory, standing tall and shouting our praise. There’s more to come: We continue to shout our praise even when we’re hemmed in with troubles, because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next. In alert expectancy such as this, we’re never left feeling shortchanged. Quite the contrary—we can’t round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit!