

## **SMYRNA: SUSTAINED BY SOVEREIGNTY**

**Text:** Revelation 2.8–11

**Theme:** Jesus Christ is Sovereign Lord over our lives, even our suffering

### **INTRODUCTION — It was AD 177**

- the place: Lyon, France; still a part of the vast Roman Empire
- there lived a young slave girl by the name of Blandina
- her mistress had come to faith in Christ; thru her witness, so too did Blandina
- Rome didn't mind if you were a Christian, as long as you would swear allegiance to Caesar
- this entailed confessing that Caesar was Lord
- many of the Christians in Lyon refused to do so including Blandina and her mistress
- they were rounded up, thrown in prison and threaten with cruel torture
- Blandina seemed to be singled out, because she was a slave
- the Romans thought she'd break quickly, knowing that as a slave she had no rights
- the promise of freedom might persuade her, then cause others to confess Caesar as Lord
- "I cannot do that," she replied. "Jesus is my God and Saviour. He would be grieved if I denied Him. We Christians love God, the Creator, and do no harm, and we cannot worship false gods."
- so they beat her, whipped her until her back was covered with blood & she fainted
- when she was revived, she adamantly refused to swear to Caesar

### **The next day, she and all the other believers were ushered into the arena in Lyon**

- there, wild beasts and lions were set upon the band of Christians
- some were cruelly harmed, others killed
- Blandina stood in the center of the open arena with her arms out like a cross
- the remaining faithful saw this, were reminded of how their Savior suffered & died
- and they managed to withstand the onslaught
- the lions encircled Blandina, but their mouths were stopped shut & she survived
- the next day, however, the Romans paraded them all out once again
- this time, they threw a net over Blandina and hurled her into the midst of a group of bulls
- the bulls trampled her and tossed her body about until she too, finally succumbed
- her soul was taken by her Lord, but her name lives as a martyr who was faithful till death

## **Why? Surrendering and saying something so simple would have saved all their lives**

- what keeps people, like this young woman Blandina, faithful until death?
- we, today, need to understand what it is that keeps people this faithful
- we need to grasp what causes them to persevere, to patiently endure
- we need this so we too can live and die well for the sake of Christ

In order for this to be, our knowledge of Jesus must be bigger than life itself

- the reality of death cannot take the preeminent place of Jesus in our minds
- Jesus is sovereign over us, His church, and yes, even our suffering

*Before we look to the letter itself, let's make ourselves familiar with Smyrna just a bit*

## **Smyrna was vying with Ephesus to be the most prominent city in Asia and doing good job of it**

- large city, 35 miles north of Ephesus, and port city
- beautiful city, had a large market area
- market place was known as “The Crown of Smyrna”
- like Ephesus, plenty of temples to many a god & goddess
- but most notably, Emperor worship really had a hold there
- laws had been implemented to “assist” in worship
- if you didn't swear allegiance to the emperor, fined, property confiscated, imprisonment, death
- clearly, these were major issues facing believers at Smyrna

*Context in which Jesus speaks; listen and hear the Sovereign One over us tell us about His...*

### **I. DESIGN IN SUFFERING**

- as Jesus speaks, He will be acknowledged as Sovereign Lord
- over all things, including His church
- he gives two descriptors

#### **1. First and Last**

- no doubt of who this is; do you remember Jesus saying, in chapter 1...
- *“Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore...”*

(Revelation 1:17b–18a ESV)

- think back as far as you can, as far as your memory will take you
- Jesus was before that
- and then let your imagination run wild in eternity future: Jesus will always be

- nothing outlasts Jesus; whatever ends, Jesus will still be there
- He is God, Sovereign over all things, especially His church
- able to speak words of strength & encouragement to you, no matter what

## **2. Died and came to life**

- Jesus is the risen and ascended Lord
- He renders death as but a shadow to the believer
- gives a strong reminder to these believers
- Smyrna nearly destroyed 700 years previously, but restored & greatly prominent
- Jesus can do so much more than simply restoring a city
- think again of those ancient martyrs—there were so many; Lyon=100 in just one day
- how could they endure, suffer so without turning away from Christ?
- because they knew...they knew that Jesus died and came back to life
- the great sustaining hope of the resurrection held them to the bitter end
- if He can do that, then He can transform you, making you a new creation

## **3. Look to this One**

- whether suffering or not, look to Jesus
- not just to improve your life, but He will completely renew you, transform you
- you'll be like a whole new creation
- sinner: lost, under judgment — look to Him, come to Him
- you never know how much time you have left on this earth
- do you remember Jennifer Riordan?
- in 2018, this 43-year old mother of two probably thought she had years
- then, a piece of broken engine blew thru side of Southwest Airlines flight 1380
- she was killed instantly
- come; today is the day of salvation
- believer: are you anxious, worried, fearful?
- are you stressed, in need of wisdom or encouragement and comfort?
- look to Him, come to Him for this and so much more
- He is the Sovereign Lord over all things

## **4. Sovereign over the suffering**

- “I know” Jesus says, once again...and He does
- He knows the *kind* of suffering: tribulation

- this is painful, wearisome, this is loss, this is hatred from others
- all because they bore Jesus' name
- He knows the *depth* of suffering: poverty they endured
- they may have already been poor, many early Ins were
- may have had property taken, business shut down, all because they professed Christ
- they were needy = but trusted God and helped one another
- Jesus tells them they are rich, though
- real wealth: knowing Jesus, having your treasure in heaven, sharing this w/ other Christians
- *“as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.”*  
(2 Corinthians 6:10 ESV)
- are you rich in Jesus Christ?
- all your earthly wealth & possessions, even most cherished: worthless when you die
- Jesus will never ask you: were you lower, middle, or upper class?
- only: do you know Me? And do I know you?
- now consider: He knows those, even, who bring it on: *synagogue of Satan*
- Jews were slandering believers there
- perhaps lying, betraying them to Roman authorities
- no matter: Jesus knows what they were enduring
- also knows these Jews – they were not true Jews
- oh, Jewish by birth, physical descent, but not by second birth
- *“For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical.”*  
(Romans 2:28 ESV)
- *“And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.”*  
(Galatians 3:29 ESV)
- instead, Jesus knew who their true father was
- in John 8, Jesus tells the wicked Jews that their father is Satan, the father of lies
- sadly, the synagogue of Satan was alive & well in Smyrna
- but the Sovereign One has a clear purpose, a design in our suffering as well
- end of v. 10: *that you may be tested*
- James 1.2 — *“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.”*
- reminiscent of 1 Peter 1.6–7

- *“In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”*

(1 Peter 1:6–7 ESV)

- even Paul helps us understand design of suffering
- *“Not only that, but 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.”*

(Romans 5:3–5 ESV)

- Do not fear, Jesus tells these believers
- there is a design here, I am testing you, shaping you, transforming you
- even in your suffering, Jesus is shaping you for glory

*Jesus is sovereign over His church, including the...*

## II. DURATION OF SUFFERING

- struggling, suffering group of believers
- courage of those in Hebrews 10.34 — *“For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.”*

### 1. Do not fear

- would seem pointless, especial when you add word “death”
- “...be faithful unto death”, v. 10
- but Jesus lets them know this will not last
- fear can be set aside if you know what you’re going thru will end in a while

### 2. Devil is behind it

- they can endure as well, knowing Jews & Romans are pawns
- devil is a powerful foe, seeking to do us harm
- but he is already a defeated foe, waiting his doom
- the Lord is over all things & controls suffering, ones who bring it on, and time of it as well

### 3. Ten days

- literal? Figurative?
- figurative: ten is a perfect number, number of completion

- as God has our days numbered, so too for suffering
- literal? Not long at all
- problem: Roman prison system not for long sentences
- hold you there until death
- this would be an end to suffering, right?
- Matthew 10.28 — *“do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”*

#### **4. Be faithful...unto death**

- only Jesus has authority to place this upon His people
- only Jesus has the ability to reward those who do so
- it is far more important to be faithful to Jesus even than to go on living

*How can saints endure the suffering they go thru? By knowing the ...*

### **III. DESTINY OF THE SUFFERER**

- note: Smyrna does not receive any criticism from Jesus
- not hard to understand why: nothing to distract from Jesus alone
- no materialism, no false comforts, nothing but Jesus alone; He's all they had left
- so Jesus simply closes this letter: those with an ear to hear, listen...
- then He gives His precious promises to His saints

#### **1. Given the crown of life**

- Smyrna's crown being used for imagery here
- that earthly beauty will crumble to ruins
- but you who endure for my sake: eternal reward
- this is the victor's laurel
- at the end of the race, each receives this great prize
- 2 Corinthians 4.17–18 — *“For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen.”*

#### **2. To the conqueror**

- conquering means remaining faithful unto death
- not be hurt by second death...by hell itself

- *“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. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.”*

(Revelation 20:6, 14 ESV)

- *“But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”*

(Revelation 21:8 ESV)

### 3. Jesus knows — death is not the end, but a shadow

- Jesus said, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.”*
- clearly, Jesus knew they could die at hands of Romans
- but moment the fire or wild beasts or sword comes, He comes and takes you
- your body will die, but your spirit will be with Jesus
- remember: Jesus is the great Shepherd, leading **thru** the valley of merely **shadow** of death
- He’s right there with you, using His rod & staff to comfort you
- *“When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.”*

*“O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”*

*The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

*Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”*

(1 Corinthians 15:54–58 ESV)

### CONCLUSION — Live like you believe in Jesus

- remain faithful no matter the suffering
- this made a lasting impact upon one man in particular
- no doubt he had heard or even was reader of this letter, from pen of John
- his name was Polycarp & a disciple of Apostle John’s
- would become head of church in Smyrna after John
- strengthened by this for another 60 years
- when persecution came, it came for him
- soldiers arrested him & brought before Roman governor
- governor commanded him: reject Christ, worship Caesar

- “don’t waste your old age; do this and live”

**86-year old bishop of Smyrna replied:**

*“86 years I have served him and he never did me any harm. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”*

**Governor:** I have wild beasts & you will be thrown to them.

**Polycarp:** *Call them out and bring them.*

**Governor:** I shall have you consumed with fire...unless you change your mind.

**Polycarp:** *The fire you threaten burns but an hour and is quenched, but you do not know the fire of coming judgment and everlasting punishment that is laid up for the unbelieving.*

Taken to stadium to be put to death. Asked that he might pray before soldiers lit his pyre.

*“O Lord God almighty. Father of Your beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, through whom we have received knowledge of You. I bless You that You considered me worthy of this day and hour, to receive a part in the number of the martyrs in the cup of Your Christ.... Among them may I be welcomed before You today. Because of this, and for all, I praise You. I bless You. I glorify You, the the eternal and heavenly high priest Jesus Christ, Your beloved Son, through whom be glory to You with Him and the Holy Spirit both now and for ages to come. Amen.”*

When they set flames to the pyre, however, the flames would not touch Polycarp. At last, they had to run him through with a sword.

Jesus is sovereign over His church and even our suffering

*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.*