

Revelation 2:8-11

Questions From Jesus To Faith Community Church *What Are You Living For?*

If you'd get in your car this morning and drive out Route 50 over the Bay Bridge and then head up 301, in about an hour and a half you'd come to a town called Smyrna, Delaware.

Smyrna is a biblical name. In fact it's the name of the church we're going to look at in Revelation 2 this morning. Interestingly, the 2 Smyrnas have more in common than just their name. If you were to look up churches in Smyrna Delaware you'd find there's a Saint Polycarp Church.

Saint Polycarp might not be a household name to most of us but he sure was to the people living in Smyrna in Asia Minor.

Around 70 A.D. a baby was born in Smyrna. He was sold as a slave in his childhood to a wealthy woman named Calisto. She reared him as her son. He came to know Christ as his Savior in those early years. As he grew older, he had the opportunity to study under the Apostle John and others who had personally sat under the teaching of Jesus Christ. Polycarp was actively involved in serving the Lord in the Church of Smyrna. Upon the death of Calisto, he became heir to all of her estate. He used his inheritance to advance the cause of Jesus Christ and to help those who were in need.

When the Pastor of his church died the Apostles and particularly the Apostle John appointed Polycarp to be the Pastor of the Church of Smyrna. Polycarp faithfully ministered in that church for many years.

Persecution of Christians was the order of the day when Marcus Aurelius was the Emperor of Rome (161-180). For many years Polycarp was spared. But, the full force of persecution was unleashed on Polycarp in the later years of his ministry. Three days before he was arrested God revealed to him in a dream that he would be burned at the stake.

When the soldiers came to get him, his friends insisted on hiding him. Polycarp made it clear that he would not allow himself to be hidden. Soon the soldiers discovered where he had been taken. When he saw them coming, he went out and greeted them warmly

and offered them something to eat. As they were eating, he asked them if he could pray before they took him away. They said, "OK," probably expecting a short prayer.

Two hours later he was still going. One report says, "inasmuch that many of the soldiers began to repent, that they were come out against so godly an old man."

When he was finished praying they put him on a donkey and took him into the city of Smyrna to be tried as one who was an adversary of the authorized pagan religion. When he arrived, they sat him in a chariot and began to urge him to say the Caesar was God and offer a sacrifice to Caesar. They said, there is no harm in that is there? At first he refused to answer. Finally, after they continued to press him Polycarp said, "I shall not do what you would persuade me to."

This made his judges very angry. They had confidently assumed that they would be able to easily persuade him to do what they wanted him to do. They didn't want a big ruckus in town. They became vicious in their words and actions. They literally threw him out of the chariot, the mob began to curse and jeer so loudly that no one could hear. As they were dragging Polycarp to the place of execution, a voice rang out from Heaven loud and clear, above the abuse of the crowd which said, "Be strong, Polycarp, and conduct yourself like a man." Foxes Book of Martyrs states that while no one saw who it was that spoke to Polycarp, many of the believers who were in the crowd clearly heard the voice.

Well Polycarp stood for Jesus to the end, despite all the efforts to persuade him to renounce Christ. One of the judges tried to get him to deny his faith by saying, "Honor your old age...Swear by Casear's Fortune. Repent, and say; Take away the Wicked."

The record goes on to say, "Polycarp, looking with a stern countenance upon the whole multitude of wicked Gentiles, that was gathered together in the Lifts, and shaking his hand at them, looked up to Heaven, and groaning said, Take away the Wicked." But the judge was not satisfied with this. He said, "Swear, and I will set you at liberty; reproach Christ."

And it is at this point that Polycarp gives his famous response --

"Eighty and six years have I now served Christ, and he has never done me the least wrong: How then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?"

The judge blew up at him and screamed, "Swear by the Genius of Caesar." Polycarp said, "I can't do that but I would like to tell you about Jesus!" The judge said, "I have

wild beasts ready, to those I will cast you unless you repent." Polycarp responded calmly, "Call for them then: for we Christians are fixed in our minds not to change from good to evil; But for me it will be good to be changed from evil, to good."

At that point the judge totally lost it. He said, "Seeing that you despise the wild beasts, I will cause you to be devoured by fire, unless you repent." He figured the threat of being burned to death would break the old man down. Polycarp answered again, "You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour, and so is extinguished; but you don't know the fire of the future judgment, and of eternal punishment, which is reserved for the ungodly. But why do you wait? Bring forth what you will!"

Apparently he had never read "How to win Friends and Influence People."

The judge cried out three times, "Polycarp has confessed himself to be a Christian." The mob responded in fury, "This is the Doctor of Asia; the Father of the Christians; an the overthrower of our gods. He that has taught so many not to sacrifice, nor pay any worship to the gods."

They ended up taking Polycarp to the stake. The usual procedure was you nailed the person to the stake so when the fire was lit they couldn't pull away. Polycarp spoke up and said, "Let me alone as I am, for He who has given me strength to endure the fire, will also enable me, without your securing me by nails, to stand without moving in the pile."

So they ended up tying him to the stake.

He prayed this prayer before the fire was lit --

Lord God Almighty, the Father of your Well-beloved, and Blessed Son, Jesus Christ, by whom we have received Knowledge of you; the God of Angels and Powers, and of every Creature, and especially the whole Race of Just Men who live in your presence! I give you hearty thanks that you have brought me to this Day, and to this Hour; that I should have a part in the Number of your Martyrs, in the Cup of your Christ, to the Resurrection of Eternal Life, both of Soul and Body, in the Incorruption of the Holy Spirit. Among which may I be accepted this Day before you, as an acceptable Sacrifice; as you the true God, with whom is no falsehood, has both before ordained, and manifested unto me, and also has now fulfilled it. For this, and for all things else, I praise you, I bless you, I glorify you by the Eternal, and Heavenly High Priest, Jesus Christ your Beloved Son; with whom to you and the Holy Spirit, be Glory both now, and to all succeeding Ages, AMEN.

At the "amen" the executioner light the fire, but something strange happened. The flames kind of arched around Polycarp.

After some time, the command was given to the executioner to stab him with a sword,. Eventually, the fire was rekindled and Polycarp's body was burned to ashes.

Last week we started a series we're calling *Questions From Jesus To Faith Community Church*.

The basis of what we're looking at in these weeks is Jesus' message to the 7 churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3.

Just a reminder, in Revelation 2:7 Jesus Christ said these words... *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches*. In fact, He uses that same tag line in His challenge to each of the 7 churches.

So the messages to the 7 churches in Revelation 2 & 3 were for them, but not exclusively for them. And so I want us to consider the historical background of each church but then I want us to ask ourselves, "What question does Jesus have for us?"

I want us to think of this series as Jesus Christ confronting Faith Community Church with hard questions.

Last week we looked at the church of Ephesus. We saw it was a busy place. In fact there was a constant flurry of activity for God. And in the middle of all that activity Jesus said, *I have this against you, that you have left your first love*. (Revelation 2:4)

We saw that God wants us to serve Him, but that's priority number 2. Priority number 1 is that He wants us to love Him. Love with out service is a counterfeit of love but service without love is empty performance.

Today we're going to look at Jesus question to Polycarp's home church, "What are you really living for?"

Open Bibles to Revelation chapter 2 page 1204

Historically we don't know for sure how this congregation got started. Not only that, but like most of the other New Testament churches, we have no idea how big the congregation was.

I. Numbers, Wealth, And A Good Reputation In The Community Don't Always Spell Success

Read verses 8-9

Pastors have this weird little thing going. When they get together they use secret pastor code. They usually ask each other “How are things going down at the church.” Ninety-nine times out of a hundred they really mean is, “How big is your church? How many people show up on a Sunday morning?”

That’s because in our culture we equate numbers with success. The truth is, 2000 people could show up and just be doing it out of a sense of duty or 50 people could be there because they love God and want to serve one another.

Which church is successful in God’s eyes?

We really have no clue how many people were in any of the churches except for the church in Jerusalem. Apparently God didn’t think that factoid was significant.

In the case of Smyrna, it’s probable that it was a church plant out of Ephesus. They’re less than 40 miles apart and according to Acts 19:26 word about what was happening in Ephesus had spread all through Asia Minor.

The important thing was, a congregation started in Smyrna and God considered it essential to get a message to that church.

But now notice. According to verse 9, this congregation had three noteworthy characteristics.

They had lots of church committees, they had plenty of money in the bank, and they got along with everybody in town. The pastor probably sat on the Mayor’s city council, right?

Actually none of those things were true. The reality was they worked hard serving God, they were dirt poor, and nobody in town liked them that much. In fact, eventually the city council would kill their pastor.

Smyrna was perhaps the most beautiful city in Asia Minor. It exists today as the city of Izmir in Turkey. It had a large harbor where a whole fleet of ships could be sheltered from attack.

Aristides, an Athenian statesman wrote, "The wind blows through every part of Smyrna and makes it as fresh as a grove of trees."

Smyrna was also a free city. At one point 6 cities in the area competed to see who would have the privilege of building a temple to Rome. Smyrna won because of their loyalty to Rome. That meant they didn't even have a Roman garrison there. They weren't on Italian soil but they were a free city.

Smyrna was a place people wanted to live. It had lots of amenities. It was like Anne Arundel County. Lots of water and lots to do.

But there was another side to Smyrna. It was also a pagan worship hub for Asia Minor. Temples to Cybele (Phrygian Earth Goddess.), Apollo (the son of Zeus), Asclepius (the god of medicine and healing), Aphrodite (the Greek goddess of love, beauty, and sexuality), and Zeus (Father of Gods and men") were all located in Smyrna.

We had to kind of "G rate" these pictures for Sunday morning consumption. Most of these gods and goddesses were very sexually oriented.

Along with all the temples was a monument to Homer (not Simpson) of Iliad and Odyssey fame, as well as a monument to the Roman Caesar, who was worshipped as a god, and was honored with the perpetual burning of incense.

Now think about this, nestled in the middle of this city that probably won one of those "All Asia Minor City" awards was a little band of people who were in love with Jesus Christ.

The church at Smyrna didn't have a lot of people as far as we can tell. They definitely weren't a mega-church.

Now let me give you a little church quiz. What would you guess is the average size of a congregation in the US? 300, 500, 750?

Fifty percent of all US congregations have 75 or less in attendance on any given Sunday. Now catch this. Ninety percent of all US churches run 350 people or less.

Just like Ephesus there might have only been one church in Smyrna, but just like the US it wouldn't have been a very big congregation.

And listen to this, Jesus says, "Hey guys, you're not in this alone. You may feel like your swimming up stream but I want you to understand that I know what you're experiencing."

The word that Jesus uses for "know" is the verb *oida*, which means "to know by experience." Jesus isn't saying, "I'm looking down on you from a distance and I see what you're going through." He's saying, "I've been there. I know what it feels like."

Jesus is saying, "I know it's rough. But I want you to know that I've been through it all before you."

"I know you've been working hard for Me. Believe Me that hasn't gone unnoticed. I know your tribulation." And the word Jesus uses is *thlipsis* in the original. *Thlipsis* is a word that means "constricted, pressed."

"I know how you've felt squeezed, compressed and restricted."

And then He says, "I know your poverty." The word for "poverty" comes from *ptochos* in Greek. It means "to cower down" "to be counted as worthless."

And once again Jesus can say, "I know exactly what that feels like."

The Bible says, *We don't have a priest who is out of touch with our reality. He's been through weakness and testing, experienced it all—all but the sin. So let's walk right up to him and get what he is so ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help.* (Hebrews 4:15-16 *The Message*)

Isn't it funny how we get the idea that if God's in something there shouldn't be any roadblocks to success? In fact we even say, "Well I guess God shut the door on that one."

Listen to this. This is the Apostle Paul writing to the church at Corinth. *But I will tarry in Ephesus until Pentecost. For a great and effective door has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.* (I Corinthians 6:8,9)

He doesn't say, "Oh well that's too hard. God must want me to do something else." He says, "I have an opportunity to serve God and Satan doesn't want me to be successful so I'm running into a whole bunch of obstacles."

Ronald Scates writes, "We who are increasingly more and more affluent and wealthy need to ask the question, 'Is that affluence pushing Jesus to the side in our lives?' The more we have, the more we tend to think we need. And the more we have, I don't know about you, but I tend to insulate myself from as much of the pain of this world as I can. And I wonder how much I am insulating myself from a healthy dependence upon Jesus Christ.

How much of my spiritual poverty is due to a consumer-oriented lifestyle that relegates Christ to the periphery of my life and begins to fuel me with the illusion that I am self-important and the myth that I am self-sufficient? It is when I am stripped of those things and all I'm left with is Christ, I know personally that is when my faith becomes more alive.

I. Numbers, Wealth, And A Good Reputation In The Community Don't Always Spell Success

All those things can accompany a successful life for God. They can accompany a successful church, but they don't have to. In fact sometimes just the opposite is true.

I. Numbers, Wealth, And A Good Reputation In The Community Don't Always Spell Success

II. Sometimes Success Is Defined By The Opposition We Face

An interesting little factoid here is that the name Smyrna comes from the Greek noun *Smurna* which is also translated "myrrh." It's the word that's used in Matthew 2:1 where the Bible says, *And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.*

Myrrh is an aromatic gummy substance that was used by the Egyptians to embalm mummies.

but was also used as a precious gift from the wise men to the Christ Child. When you squeeze myrrh it gives off a an incense-type sent.

Think about that imagery. While all the pressure of persecution and opposition seemed like trouble to the church at Smyrna, Jesus is saying, “The more they squeeze you the more beautiful the fragrance.”

Sometimes success is determined by the opposition we face. Now by that I don’t mean that God wants us all to be obnoxious so we can go around and say, “We’re suffering for Jesus.”

In fact, just the opposite is true. The Bible says: *Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one.* (Colossians 4:6)

It says: *Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers.* (Ephesians 4:29)

How about this one: *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.* (I Peter 2:12 NIV)

See, the Christians in Smyrna, couldn’t in good conscious, burn incense to a bust of Caesar so they were falsely accused of being unpatriotic.

The Christians in Smyrna, couldn’t in good conscious, sacrifice to the false gods and goddesses so they were falsely accused of being atheists and anti-God.

They didn’t go out of their way to stir up trouble, it just happened.

In fact some of the harshest opposition came from Jews living in Smyrna. You would have at least thought they would have supported the Christians in their stand against idolatry. But it didn’t happen that way.

Here’s a group of believers who had already been through tribulation, poverty, and blasphemous slander.

They didn’t have a million dollar building. No high def video projectors, digital mixers, or padded seats and air conditioning. They didn’t even have a church van. We have one and the AC doesn’t work and we get upset. They didn’t even have a church chariot.

They didn’t hold an *All About Kids* Program or Vacation Bible School and have a couple of hundred kids from their neighborhood show up. They were despised and rejected.

So here's what Jesus says: **Read verse 10**

But wait there's more! Jesus says, "Hang in there. Your greatest, most intense suffering hasn't even happened yet."

And look at this, He says, "Don't fear. There's more on the way. Satan's got round two headed toward you!"

I don't know whether the 10 day thing is literal or it means there's some undefined symbolic period of persecution coming, but whatever it is, it's coming.

We don't like trouble. We want everyone to pat us on the back and tell us what great people we are. We don't want persecution or disruption. We want life to go smoothly.

But sometimes the more successful we are living for God, the more waves seem to be generated. The rockier it gets.

So here's the question we all have to face... What are you living for?

Jesus says, *Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.* Faithful to death? Wait a minute, that's not what I signed up for.

Here's the good news. There's a real good chance that no one's going to burn you at the stake because of your faith.

But here are a few of this past week's headlines from around the world:

Two Indonesian Churches Torched

Bishops battle for Zimbabwe's Churches

Islamists Torch Churches in Tanzania

Bomb Blasts Near Nigeria Churches

Church Attack in Northern Iraq Wounds 23

Christian activist found dead in India

Arrests in Eritrea Continue

Egypt: Muslims attack Christians after installation of Church Bell

Lao Authorities arrest Christians in separate incidents

Children may lose Religious Rights in Tajikistan

House Church Pastor In China Detained

This is the daily reality for our fellow Christians around the world. So I would ask again what Jesus asked the church at Smyrna, “What are you living for?”

Are you so wrapped up in this life that when things don’t go your way you struggle with your faith?

“I lost my job, my kid’s giving me fits, I don’t like the doctor’s report, they weren’t friendly enough down at that Faith Community Church, so I’m giving up on God!”

Here’s what I think Jesus is saying. “Be faithful. Walk with Me even when it isn’t popular because what you’re going to experience in eternity is so far beyond anything you’ll experience here in this life that it’s not even worthy to be compared.

Robert Vancendak puts it this way. He says, “Jesus is making an understatement here. The faithful believer will be more than amply repaid for any sacrifice that he or she might make for the name of Jesus in this life.”

What’s worth dying for? For Polycarp it was the name and glory and worship of Jesus Christ.

See here’s the thing...if it’s not worth dying for, it’s not worth living for. So what are you living for today? What’s got top priority in your life? If you’re not living day by day, moment by moment for Jesus Christ are you really living, or are you just existing?