

# Set Your Mind on Things Above

Revelation 2:8-11

Notes for Preachers

Intro.

I would show this picture to your audience. “A picture is worth a 1000 words.”



This is a picture of “The Forty Martyrs of Sebaste” or the Holy Forty. They were killed near the city of Sebaste, in Lesser Armenia (present-day Sivas in Turkey), victims of the persecutions of Licinius who, after 316, persecuted the Christians of the East. The

earliest account of their existence and martyrdom is given by Bishop Basil of Caesarea (370–379) in a homily he delivered on their feast day.

According to Basil, the governor ordered forty soldiers who had openly confessed themselves Christians, "I command you to make an offering to the Roman gods. If you will not, you will be stripped of your military status."

The forty soldiers all believed firmly in the Lord Jesus. They knew they must not deny him no matter what the governor would do to them. Camdidus spoke for the legion. "Nothing is dearer or of greater honor to us than Christ our God."

The governor then tried other tactics to get them to deny their faith. First, he offered them money and imperial honors. Then he threatened them with torments, and torture with the rack and with fire.

Camdidus replied, "You offer us money that remains behind and glory that fades away. You seek to make us friends of the Emperor but alienate us from the true King. We desire one gift, the crown of righteousness. We are anxious for one glory, the glory of the heavenly kingdom. We love honors, those of heaven.

"You threaten fearful torments and call our godliness a crime, but you will not find us fainthearted or attached to this life or easily stricken with terror. For the love of God, we are prepared to endure any kind of torture."

The governor was enraged. Now he wanted them to die a slow painful death. They were stripped naked and herded to the middle of a frozen lake. He set soldiers to guard them to prevent any of them from coming to shore and escaping.

The forty encouraged each other as though they were going to battle. "How many of our companions in arms fell on the battle front, showing themselves loyal to an earthly king? Is it possible for us to fail to sacrifice our lives in faithfulness to the true King? Let us not turn aside, oh warriors, let us not turn our backs in flight from the devil." Thus, they spent the night courageously bearing their pain and rejoicing in the hope of soon being with the Lord.

To increase the torment of the Christians, baths of hot water were put around the lake. With these the governor hoped to weaken the firm resolve of the freezing men. He told them, "You may come ashore when you are ready to deny your faith. In the end, one of them did weaken, came off the ice and got into a warm bath.

One of the guards, Aglaius, who was watching over the martyrs, saw the traitor leave and at the same moment witnessed a supernatural brilliancy overshadowing the martyrs. He at once proclaimed himself a Christian, threw off his garments, and joined the remaining thirty-nine. Thus, the number of forty remained complete. At daybreak, the stiffened bodies of the confessors, which still showed signs of life, were burned and the ashes cast into a river. Christians, however, collected the remains, and the ashes were

distributed throughout many cities which contributed to this amazing story spreading to church communities throughout the known world.

Some call it "the mystery of martyrdom." *Why would seeing 39 believers who were willing to die for their faith inspire a highly trained soldier, in the prime of his life, to join them in death? One of the most perplexing questions Christians around the world regularly are forced to answer is "how can a loving, omnipotent God allow innocent people to suffer? This question not only creates interest in this message, but it also establishes felt need. How can we explain why people suffer?"*

The story of the Forty Martyrs turns that age old question on its heels. We hear this story, and we must ask "why would any pagan be motivated to become a Christian when he witnesses 39 virile young men willingly embrace unjust suffering for no other reason than their deep love of Jesus!" It's counterintuitive. It's other worldly. Some would say it "nuts." Who in their right mind would embrace suffering as their first and only step as a new believer? Who indeed? Nonetheless, when we hear stories like that of the Forty Martyrs, we are compelled to ask how could their approach to the problem of pain be so radically different than the rest of the world?

Is it just the mystery of martyrdom or is it something else? In Revelation 2:8-11, we are introduced to an entire church body that thought like these Forty Martyrs. In the words of Paul in Colossians 3:2, they "set their minds on things above!" Be prepared then to have your thinking about the problem of pain rattled as we examine the message that Jesus delivers to this very unique congregation.

This is a picture of modern-day Smyrna (Izmir). *Use a picture from the film "Times of Fire"*



Homer slept here. No. Not Homer Simpson. Homer the epic poet, famed (some say blamed) for The Iliad and The Odyssey. In fact, he was born here, but back then the townsfolk called the place Smyrna. The local culture rivaled Troy's as the most advanced in the region. Nicknamed "Izmir the Beautiful," it is Turkey's third largest city, with a port second only to that in Istanbul. Culturally dynamic and cosmopolitan, it boasts a broad range of both historical attractions and modern distractions. Antiquities such as statues of Poseidon and Demeter, ethnic crafts including carpets and camel bridles, and a fine collection of 20th century Turkish art all vie for attention in the city's museums. Out along the palm-shaded boulevards, aqueducts, mosques and other architectural marvels date the city and tell tales of its ancient history.

As we continue our teaching series on Jesus' messages to the 7 churches of Asia Minor open your device or turn in your Bibles to Revelation 2:8-11:

*"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. 9 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. 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.*

*11 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.*

The big idea for this message is "we will have a better answer for the problem of pain when we look at it from a 'heavenly perspective.'"

## **I. We Will Have A Heavenly View Of The Problem Of Pain When Know The Character of Christ 2:8**

*These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.*

### **A. He is the first and the last**

Jesus begins his message to the church of Smyrna by identifying himself as the first and the last. The great 19<sup>th</sup> century German historian Mommsen called Smyrna of John's day a paradise of municipal vanity. It claimed to be the first in beauty, and first in Caesar worship. It boasted that it had one of the best theaters in Asia, one of the best athletic stadiums, and one of the best libraries. It claimed to be the "glory of Asia!" It was a model of all that town planning should be. Great spacious streets ran from one end of the city to the other. The most famous of these streets was called the "Golden Street." At the sea end, stood the temple of Cybil; on the way along it there were temples to Apollo, to Asclepius, to Aphrodite. And inland where the street met the foothills there stood the temple of Zeus. To the residents of Smyrna, earthly honors were the first and the last.

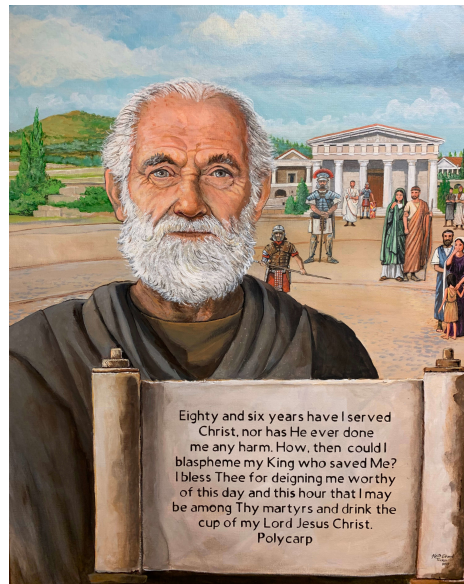
By identifying himself as the first and the last, Jesus is directly challenging the secular thinking at Smyrna. He is also introducing an other-worldly perspective about what should matter most to any believer. It is as if Jesus is saying to Christians, "what is your priority? Is it creature comforts? Is it you being the best and having the best? Or can you say with the Apostle Paul: *I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.* (Philippians 1:20, 21)

"For me to live is Christ and to die is gain." Really, who lives that way? When is the last time you attended a funeral service and heard someone say, "I sure hope I am the

next one to die.” In fairness to Paul, he never said at any funeral service that he hoped to be the next to die. He did say, however, he anxiously hoped to go to Heaven sooner rather than later! Can you say that? Furthermore, Paul said in that same passage that if he can’t go to heaven now, he longed to spend his time telling others about Jesus. Does that logic seem a little out of this world to you? Could this kind of thinking change how you answer the questions the world has about the problem of pain?

### ***B. He died and came to life***

Jesus continues his message to the church at Smyrna by identifying himself as he who “died and came to life.” Like the phrase the “first and the last,” this phrase emphasized Christ’s awareness of the pride of the city. In 600 B.C the Lydians destroyed the city and for 400 years Smyrna was dead. It was no city; then about 200 B.C. one of Alexander the Great’s generals, Lysimachus rebuilt it. During the beatification process the Jewish community contributed 10,000 denarii. This represented the amount of money that an average worker would make in 30 years. To say the least, this was a very large sum of money. Because of their influence then in this resurrected town, Jewish leaders were able to make life miserable for Christians which Jesus acknowledges with his reference to the synagogue of Satan in v. 9.



The most notable Christian who suffered in Smyrna was the best-known pastor of the church. Polycarp was a disciple of Saint John the Apostle. The Asia Minor Churches recognized Polycarp's leadership and chose him to represent them on a council that appeared before Pope Anicetus. We know Polycarp best, however, from the words he spoke at his martyrdom in 86 A.D. He was sentenced to be burned at the stake for refusing to acknowledge that Caesar is God.

When the pyre was ready, Polycarp took off all his outer clothes and loosened his under-garments. There and then he was surrounded by the material for the pyre. When they tried to fasten him also with nails, he said, "Leave me as I am. The one who gives me the strength to endure the fire will also give me strength to stay quite still on the pyre, even without the precaution of your nails." So, they did not fix him to the pyre with nails,

but only fastened him instead.

Looking up to heaven, he said, "Lord, almighty God, Father of your beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, through whom I have come to the knowledge of yourself, God of angels, of powers, of all creation, of all the race of saints who live in your sight, I bless you for judging me worthy of this day, this hour, so that in the company of the martyrs, I may share the cup of Christ, your anointed one, and so rise again to eternal life in soul and body through the power of the Holy Spirit.

"I praise you for all things, I bless you, I glorify you through the eternal priest of heaven, Jesus Christ, your beloved Son. Through him be glory to you, together with him and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen."

One of his parishioners witnessed Polycarp's execution and wrote the following statement:

*When he had said, "Amen" and finished the prayer, the officials at the pyre, lit it. But, when a great flame burst out, those of us privileged to see it witnessed a strange and wonderful thing. Like a ship's sail swelling in the wind, the flame became as it were a dome encircling the martyr's body. Surrounded by the fire, his body was like bread that is baked, or gold and silver white-hot in a furnace, not like flesh that has been burnt. So sweet a fragrance came to us that it was like that of burning incense or some other costly and sweet-smelling gum.  
(from a letter by the Church of Smyrna on the martyrdom of Saint Polycarp)*

Wow! How did he do it? Most conservative scholars believe that John wrote the book of Revelation in 95 A.D. Obviously, that is 9 years after his dear friend and most famous disciple was martyred. As Jesus instructed John to advise the church that he is the first and the last who died and came to life again, how could John not help think about Polycarp. For John and the believers at Smyrna, Polycarp's testimony served as exhibit "A" of how to have an other-worldly view of the problem of pain.

## **II. We Will Have A Heavenly View Of The Problem Of Pain When Know Who We Are in Christ 2:9**

*9 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.*

To add clarity to your message and to make sure your audience is tracking with you, add a transitional statement here like we have seen "we will have a better answer for the problem of pain when we understand the character of Christ. Secondly, we will have a better answer for the problem of pain when we know who we are in Christ.

## ***A. He knows our suffering***

In this second portion of his letter to the church of Smyrna, Jesus commends the church. He begins by acknowledging that he knows about their persecution. The primary reason for their persecution was that in 196 BC, Smyrna was the first city in the world to erect a temple to “Dea Roma,” the goddess Rome. Then in AD 26 Smyrna vied with 6 other cities of Asia Minor for the right to erect a temple to the godhead Tiberius, the reigning emperor of the day and they alone won. Accordingly, they were fanatical about emperor worship. All citizens were required by law to offer sacrifices and say Caesar is Lord! As we already noted, this fanaticism contributed to the martyrdom of Polycarp.

In addition to this Roman persecution, the leaders of Jewish community used their favored standing to make life miserable for the Christians. Their 10,000 denarii gift for the beatification of the city provided them a bully pulpit to slander the church. The fact that the members of the church were financially poor compared to these representatives of the “synagogue of Satan” made them easy marks. So those who wished them harm accused them of cannibalism, presumably because they ate the flesh and blood of Jesus in their observance of the Eucharist. They were labeled “immoral,” because their practice of greeting one another with a holy kiss and regularly boasting of their love for one another. Furthermore, they were called atheists. This seems to be quite curious until we learn that the basis of this claim is they did not support the worship of Caesar or the pagan gods.

As we examine this list, it is easy to see that they are all false accusations. For many believers that fact could strike to the heart of their struggle trying to answer the question of the problem of suffering. It is one thing to suffer when you are guilty, but it just seems so wrong when you suffer for doing what is right. It is too easy to say, “God, I don’t get it. What have I done wrong? Why me? Why now?” If we are honest, who among us have not had those thoughts when we suffer?

So, these Christians had been falsely accused, their pastor has just been martyred, and the leaders of their community were conspiring together to make them more miserable. At that very moment Jesus says, “you are rich!”

## ***B. He declares that we are rich!***

How in the world could Jesus expect these believers to think this is true? Obviously, it would take some other-worldly thinking to believe this challenge. Clearly, Jesus longs for his church to have a radically different view of how to contemplate the question of suffering that is common among unbelievers.

How do we do that? Jesus shows us how in the last portion of this letter to this church!

**Add another transitional statement here like we have seen “we will have a better answer for the problem of pain when we understand the character of Christ and when we know who we are in Christ.**

**Finally, we will have a better answer for the problem of pain when we know what we need to do!**

### **III. We Will Have A Heavenly View Of The Problem Of Pain When Know What We Need to Do 2:10, 11**

*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.*

*11 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.*

#### **A. He says, "Stop being afraid!"**

This 1<sup>st</sup> command is a present active imperative in the Greek text. Knowing that probably does not bless you. But you should know this this expression carries the connotation of "stop doing what you are doing!" That is a very important point because any knowledgeable psychologist will tell you that you can't help being afraid. God has created you to be afraid to protect you from danger. So, if you are in the Alaska forest and you see a grizzly bear, the amygdala in your brain will automatically trigger. The amygdala is the emotional center of your brain. When it is triggered, you will have a biochemical reaction that will send adrenalin to your muscles. Your heart will beat faster. Your palms will sweat. Your lungs will push more air through your body. You will feel like you are on "red alert." All of which prepares you to run fast and hard from the bear in the woods. Obviously, that is a good thing! "Thank you, Jesus, for creating us with an amygdala!"

But when the threat of the bear is gone, it is harmful and exhausting to have sweaty, palms and a heart that is racing. In fact, if there is no bear around, we can suffer an anxiety attack. The inability to stop feeling afraid is the primary reason so many people suffer from depression and ongoing anxiety attacks. So, what do we do? We need to engage the cerebral cortex! That is the part of the brain that controls cognitive thought. The process is actually very simple. We just need to look around and see that the bear is gone, and we will deescalate from all the emotional energy that caused our body to react as it did.

The problem we have in the world today is too few of us understand this natural process and we don't know how to deescalate. Thus, we continue to be afraid which leads to depression and a sense of hopelessness.

So, Jesus is not saying, "Don't be afraid!" That would be unrealistic. He is saying do not continue in your fear! You say how do we do that? You must engage your cerebral cortex and say, "there is no bear in the woods." Or I don't need to be afraid of the bear because the one who is the first and the last who was dead and now alive will protect me from the bear!



## **B. He says, “Continue to be faithful!”**

Similarly, Jesus commands us to “continue to be faithful.” Once again, this command is a present active imperative in the Greek text. This time since the command does not include the adverb “not,” it means the church members should continue to do what they were already doing. Thus, “Keep being faithful!” Why wouldn’t they? If you had to endure the slander, the persecution and the poverty that was a fixture in their life, would you be tempted to give up?

Bart Ehrman did. He was raised in a conservative Bible believing church. He came to Christ through the work of Youth for Christ. He attended both Moody Bible Institute and Wheaton College. He did his PhD under Dr. Bruce Metzger at Princeton. Dr. Metzger is certainly the most formative conservative scholar on the integrity of the Greek texts that support the New Testament.

Despite his early training, today Bart Ehrman is an atheist! Why? Here is his explanation:”

*I continued to be a Christian—a completely committed Christian—for many years after I left the evangelical fold. Eventually, though, I felt compelled to leave Christianity altogether. I did not go easily. On the contrary, I left kicking and screaming, wanting desperately to hold on to the faith I had known since childhood....I could no longer explain how there can be a good and all-powerful God actively involved with this world, given the state of things. For many people who inhabit this planet, life is a cesspool of misery and suffering. I came to a point where I simply could not believe that there is a good and kindly disposed Ruler who is in charge of it.*

*Bart D. Ehrman, God’s Problem. (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), p. 3.*

From what Bart Ehrman writes, he has one reason for the problem of evil. We suffer because God either caused our suffering or doesn’t have the power or interest to end it! In fairness to Ehrman, his perspective on suffering is universally held. Einstein famously insisted that God has the power to end our suffering, but He has no interest in doing that. On the other hand, Rabbi Kusher insists God does care for us and would end our suffering if He could, but He does not have the power to do that.

The real tragedy of Bart Ehrman’s story is that he has written and edited 30 books. He has also authored six New York Times bestsellers. "For conservative Christians, Ehrman is a bit of a bogeyman, the Prof. Moriarty of biblical studies, constantly pressing an attack on our long-held beliefs about God, Jesus, and the Bible.... Finally, He is a blogger! His most loyal followers read his musings five, sometimes six days a week at “The Bart Ehrman Blog.” In 2022, Ehrman’s blog took in \$503,000 in subscription dues.

Who is the main target of his attacks on Christianity? Young people! The future leaders of the Christian church. How is he persuading them to join his forces? His attack springs from his inability to answer to his satisfaction the question for the problem of evil.

But he told us about his perspective on this issue. It centers in his conviction that a good all-powerful God would never allow his followers or anyone for that matter to suffer the injustices in the world.

What then would he say to Polycarp? What would he say to the church of Smyrna? He certainly would not say what Jesus says in Revelation 2:8-11. By his own admission, he can't understand such heavenly thinking? Do you? It probably takes meeting a Polycarp or witnessing the Forty Martyrs bravely facing their death to see the difference.

If you use this last story, consider putting it in your own words. Read and reread it enough times so you can tell it without reading it. The reason for that is when you speak extemporaneously, you are more likely to be able to share with some emotion. John Stott the famous preacher from Great Britain told his preaching classes "if there is no fire in the pulpit, there will be no flame in the pew." As you are concluding this message, this is the time to be on fire!

I met someone like that some time ago when my wife and I were visiting our youngest daughter who has been a Christian worker in a predominantly Muslim country. The leader of her group is a man I will call "Dave." Understand that in this country Christians were regularly persecuted and arrested for no other reason than they confessed to be Christians. Sounds like Smyrna, right?

In any case, I asked Dave what exactly he was doing as servant of Jesus in this dangerous context. He told us he loved doing street evangelism. When he said that, I thought he can't mean what I think he is saying. So, somewhat dubious I asked, "how can you do that here and avoid being arrested?" He answered, "I can't. I have been arrested and placed in prison but some of my best witnessing opportunities have been during those days that I spent in a Muslim jail. In fact, I have seen more response to the message of the Gospel in jail than I have seen anywhere else. Eventually, the Muslim authorities saw that too. They released me from jail because they concluded I was less of a threat out of jail than I was in it!"

That is heavenly thinking! Have you met anyone like that? Think like that and Jesus promises you will receive the victor's crown. At athletic events at the stadium in Smyrna, victors received an earthly victor's crown. Using that picture Jesus, asks these believers at Smyrna to take their eyes off the "bear" in the forest and remind themselves that the second death reserved for unbelievers is not their destiny. Their eternal home is heaven!

Do you feel like you are running from all the pressures of this world. Are you tempted to give up? Do you wonder why your life is filled with so much hardship? Are you hounded by your fears? Hear well the words of Jesus to you! Stop being afraid! Remain faithful! He who is the first and the last who was dead and raised to life will protect you from any bear in the woods!