

Study Questions
Week Three: Revelation 2: 8-11
Dealing with Spiritual Bullies

Smyrna: Early Christians faced persecution all across the Roman Empire due to their refusal to honor Caesar as “Lord and Saviour” and insistence that Jesus was Lord of all. However, only two of the seven Revelation churches receive direct mention of persecution. Smyrna is one of them.



The city boasted of its renowned thinkers (eg Homer) along with the temple of Athena and a beautiful, bustling seaport. The city was called, “The Flower of Asia”. Smyrna still exists today but under the name Izmus (one of our daughters has a friend whose mother lives there). Believers in Smyrna faced “afflictions” and “poverty”. Whether we call it “persecution” or bullying”, the intent remains the same- tempting us to deny our Lord.

A teenager named Polycarp-one of the last to be discipled by the elderly Apostle John- likely sat and listened intently when the messenger first read this letter. Although severe hostilities against Christianity had already erupted across the entire Empire, this letter prepared young Polycarp for what he would face later in life. More on that later. For now, this letter also prepares us and our children to stand firm in the faith.

How do we cope with spiritual bullies? Globally, most Christ-followers today face tribulation and ensuing poverty. Although our current nation allows religious freedom, some of you may be facing individual spiritual bullying from family, co-workers, and neighbors. Our children undoubtedly face it in school and elsewhere. Jesus brings words of hope for all those persecuted- both foreign and at home. Let's learn how to deal with bullies. Our children, like Polycarp, will need help in the future.

Discussion questions:

1. Open with prayer and sharing. Then read the letter...perhaps several times over.
2. What similarities and distinctions would you make between “persecution” and “bullying”? When have you faced either? How did you feel?
3. How is Jesus described in the passage (vs 8)? Has this description appeared anywhere else in the book? Why is this description so important for facing persecution?
4. What does Jesus know about this church (vs. 9)? How does His opinion differ from that of those around them? Why do you think He describes them as “rich”? (compare for example Hebrews 10:32 ff). Why is this so vital to remember when bullied?
5. What does He tell them is about to happen (vs. 10)? What two clear instructions does He give them to prepare for persecution? How are these applicable to us?
6. There remains an intense spiritual battle not always readily evident. How is this hidden battle described in vs 9-10? The word “Satan” means accuser or slanderer. How do persecution and bullying make use of slander and accusing when assaulting our faith?
7. God oversees all persecution and only allows what He has enabled us to handle. How is that evident in vs 10-11?
8. Application: There are four responses to persecution that apply in our society where we live relatively free of toxic persecution, but still face spiritual bullying:

- a. We can identify with and pray for the many Christians who are suffering persecution around the world (cf. Rom. 12:15; Heb. 13:3);
 - b. We can realize that spiritual bullying happens among us and prepare for it;
 - c. We can ask ourselves how many compromises we have made to avoid any persecution at work or in secular society;
 - d. We can endure general trials that draw us away from Jesus and closer to the world
9. Close by praying for the persecuted church and any family/friends you know who currently face trials and poverty because of their walk with the Lord. Especially pray for our children and teens.

SPECIAL CLOSING STORY

Long after this letter first circulated among the churches, young Polycarp became a spiritual leader in this region. Around A.D. 155, the now elderly Bishop Polycarp was burned alive for refusing to call Caesar "Lord" during an extensive persecution instigated by religious leaders who ironically gathered the wood for his burning on the Sabbath. The story is told in "The Martyrdom of Polycarp" (available online at www.earlychristianwritings.com)

In short, when soldiers brought Polycarp into the stadium, the proconsul pressed him to recant. Romans called the Christians "atheists" because they refused to worship the Roman gods. But when the magistrate pressed him hard and said, "Swear the oath, and I will release you; revile the Christ," Polycarp said, "Eighty-six years have I been His servant, and He has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" One wonders if he was thinking about this very letter when he spoke. At this declaration, Polycarp was burned at the stake