**Be Faithful**

Revelation 2:8-11

This is the most famous ancient text about a martyrdom outside of the Bible. It’s from around 160 A.D. These are direct quotes from the manuscript:

<https://www.diggingfortruth.org/digging-deeper/church-at-smyrna#:~:text=The%20local%20church%20of%20Smyrna,Irenaeus%2C%20Eusebius%2C%20and%20Jerome>.

<https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/study/module/polycarp/>

When he heard about [these threats], the redoubtable Polycarp was not in the least upset, and was happy to stay in the city, but eventually he was persuaded to leave. He went to friends in the nearby country, where as usual he spent the whole time, day and night, in prayer for all people and for the churches throughout the world.

“Three days before he was arrested, while he was praying, he had a vision of the pillow under his head in flames. He said prophetically to those who were with him, ‘I will be burnt alive.’” *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*

Those who were looking for him were coming near, so he left for another house. They immediately followed him, and when they could not find him, they seized two young men from his own household and tortured them into confession…

The police and horsemen came with the young man at suppertime on the Friday with their usual weapons, as if coming out against a robber. That evening, they found him lying down in the upper room of a cottage. He could have escaped but he refused saying, “God’s will be done.” …When he finished praying… they put him on a donkey, and took him into the city….

As Polycarp was being taken into the arena, a voice came to him from heaven: “Be strong, Polycarp and play the man!” No one saw who had spoken, but our brothers who were there heard the voice. When the crowd heard that Polycarp had been captured, there was an uproar. The Proconsul asked him whether he was Polycarp. On hearing that he was, he tried to persuade him to apostatize, saying, “Have respect for your old age, swear by the fortune of Caesar. Repent, and say, ‘Down with the Atheists!’” Polycarp looked grimly at the wicked heathen multitude in the stadium, and gesturing towards them, he said, “Down with the Atheists!”

“Swear,” urged the Proconsul, “reproach Christ, and I will set you free.” “86 years have I have served him,” Polycarp declared, “and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?” *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*

“I have wild animals here,” the Proconsul said. “I will throw you to them if you do not repent.” “Call them,” Polycarp replied. “It is unthinkable for me to repent from what is good to turn to what is evil…” “If you despise the animals, I will have you burned.”

“You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour, and is then extinguished, but you know nothing of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. Why are you waiting? Bring on whatever you want.” *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*

It was all done in the time it takes to tell. The crowd collected wood and bundles of sticks… they simply bound him with his hands behind him like a distinguished ram chosen from a great flock for sacrifice. Ready to be an acceptable burnt-offering to God, he looked up to heaven, and said, “O Lord God Almighty, the Father of your beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ… I give you thanks that you count me worthy to be numbered among your martyrs, sharing the cup of Christ and the resurrection to eternal life, both of soul and body, through the immortality of the Holy Spirit. May I be received this day as an acceptable sacrifice…”

“Then the fire was lit, and the flame blazed furiously. We who were privileged to witness it saw a great miracle… The fire shaped itself into the form of an arch, like the sail of a ship when filled with the wind, and formed a circle around the body of the martyr…” *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*

Eventually, when those wicked men saw that his body could not be consumed by the fire, they commanded an executioner to pierce him with a dagger. When he did this such a great quantity of blood flowed that the fire was extinguished. The crowd were amazed.

“This is the story of the blessed Polycarp, the twelfth martyr in Smyrna…”

This is the **first official documentation of a martyr** outside of the Bible, in around 160 AD. And it took place in the city of Smyrna. By the second and third century this part of what we call Turkey and they call Asia had become a focal point for Roman Emperor worship and therefore a dangerous place to be a Christian. Polycarp was the 12th prominent martyr in Smyrna. And his arrest, suffering and death are intentionally documented to follow ***the pattern of Jesus***.

* A known godly life, exemplary in prayer.
* Unjustly arrested and a mockery of a trial.
* A public execution with miraculous signs.
* Vindicated in death.

It is fascinating to look at the historical realities of Smyrna as we study the letter sent to them from Jesus 50-60 years before these events took place. What we will see in this short letter are ***three exhortations from the Lord Jesus***. First:

**Exhortations from Jesus:**

1. Assess your true **Condition**

“And to the angel of the church of Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.’” Revelation 2:8

All seven of these letters are openly addressed from the Lord Jesus to His church. Seven is the number of completion, so Jesus is writing to all of us, throughout all of history, all over the world. We saw last week that there is **a pattern in all seven letters**, but the pattern is not perfectly consistent. Every letter has an introduction, describing Jesus in a unique way. Every letter has an affirmation of something positive at the church (with two exceptions). Every letter has a confrontation of something negative, with one exception – ***this letter to Smyrna does NOT have anything negative about the church.*** The other six churches have “something against them” but Smyrna is the suffering church, facing tribulation and persecution for no fault of their own. Then all the letters have an exhortation from Jesus and close with a promise.

Notice how Jesus is described here: **the first and the last**. The Creator and the Judge. The beginning and the end. The one THROUGH whom all things were made and the one FOR WHOM all things were made. Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the A and the Z. This does not mean Jesus himself was created – He is the uncreated one, fully eternal and fully divine. Jesus is the one who always existed and always will exist. He is the God of all being; the God who is.

And Jesus is **the firstborn from the dead**; the first to rise again in a glorified human body, never to die again. Several people in Scripture were raised from the dead, but they died again. They were raised temporarily in non-glorified bodies that still got sick and still died. Lazarus was not immortal after Jesus raised him from the dead.

***Jesus was the first to fully defeat death*** and He did so by being killed and raising Himself from the dead on the third day, proving all of His teachings and claims to be true. Jesus truly is the resurrection and the life, as he said to Mary and Martha when Lazarus lay dead in his tomb. He asked the sisters then, “Do you believe this?” And they said yes. Then Jesus proved it not only by raising Lazarus, but later by walking out of the tomb HIMSELF.

That’s who the letter is from: Jesus, the first and the last, the risen one. And His first exhortation to us today is to assess our true condition.

**Exhortations from Jesus:**

1. Assess your true **Condition**
	* Are you rich or poor in God’s **Kingdom**?

“I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich).” Revelation 2:9

Every letter has this affirmation from the Lord Jesus where He says, “I know.” Be encouraged by this wonderful truth: **Jesus knows YOU**. He knows every part of your life. Every struggle. Every doubt. Every fear. Every sadness. Every loss. Every worry. Every concern. He knows.

Jesus looks at you right now and says, “I know your tribulation.”

As your pastor, ***I know a lot of the struggles this little church*** has been through in the last year. Sudden, tragic deaths of loved ones. Scary health diagnoses. Difficult financial situations. Broken, hurting marriages. Struggling children and grandchildren, some who have walked away from the Lord and the church. Chronic pain and disability. Battles with addiction.

I know a little. Jesus knows it all. He knows every aspect of your suffering; every trial you are facing right now. Kristin and I were in a mental health facility one time and on the wall the words were printed: ***“Everyone is fighting a battle you know nothing about.”*** That was true in that facility, but it is equally true in this room today. Everyone has a battle. Everyone is facing some form of tribulation.

And Jesus knows it 100%. He knows. He sees. He is with you in the midst of it. And he perfectly sees your good and your bad; your strengths and weaknesses; your righteousness and your sin.

The question is, ***how accurately do WE assess our own condition?***

In Smyrna, **the people were poor**; monetarily poor. But to God, they were actually rich. They were spiritually strong; they were filled with faith and faithfulness, even in the midst of severe persecution. They stood firm against false teaching and immorality. They did not compromise like so many other churches.

***What about you?*** Are you rich in the things of this world but poor in terms of treasure in heaven? Or are you broke when it comes to money but rich in faith and a vibrant walk with the Lord?

**Jesus told a parable about a wealthy businessman** who was doing so well with his farms that his barns couldn’t hold all of the harvest. So he decided to tear down his small barns and build bigger barns. Very sensible choice it would seem to our modern minds. But the problem was the man’s heart:

“And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’” Luke 12:19-20

**His faith was in his money**, his physical resources, his business sense and plans. His plan was self-indulgence. He wasn’t using his money and resources to serve anyone else. So, God called him a fool. And Jesus summarized the lesson this way:

“So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.” Luke 12:21

It is possible to gain the whole world at the cost of your soul. Jesus said that the way we live is either going to be for His kingdom or for the kingdom of this world. We will either store up treasure on earth, where moth and rust destroy; or we will store up treasure in heaven.

So what is your true condition? ***Are you rich or poor?*** In God’s eyes does He look at you and say, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” as He did to the church in Smyrna? Or does He look on you like this businessman and say, “You fool. You’ve stored up for yourself many things that you will not even be able to enjoy”?

**Exhortations from Jesus:**

1. Assess your true **Condition**
	* Are you a true **Israelite**?

“And the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.” Revelation 2:9

One of the problematic trends in the early church was **a group called Judaizers** who wanted a return to the Old Testament Law. They insisted on circumcision for boys, on eating kosher, on keeping all of the religious festivals, wearing certain clothes, cutting your hair a certain way. It was bad enough in Galatia that Paul wrote a whole letter on the topic to make it clear that these Judaizers were teaching a false gospel, they were full blown heretics, false teachers.

That’s what Jesus is addressing here in Smyrna. ***People who claimed to be Jews*** and would have looked and sounded like they were. They wore the right clothes, they knew the Old Testament backwards and forwards. They knew all the traditions and confronted those who failed to keep them. But in God’s eyes they were not a true synagogue of His people, they actually belonged to Satan. Here is how Paul said it in Romans.

1. Assess your true **Condition**
	* Are you a true **Israelite**?

“For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.” Romans 2:28-29

Like everything in the Old Testament, ***circumcision was a physical act that pointed to a spiritual truth***. Like the tabernacle, the whole sacrifice system, the Passover, the temple, the altar, the ark of the covenant. None of those things were magic in themselves. They pointed to spiritual realities that were all fulfilled in CHRIST.

***Circumcision was how Jewish baby boys were marked in blood*** as belonging to God. This pointed ahead to BAPTISM as the public sign of being marked as belonging to the Lord in a personal commitment. This is why some churches sprinkle babies with water, because circumcision was done on eight-day-old babies and they want to honor that ancient principle.

But neither circumcision nor baptism save a person. Only faith in Jesus does that. For those in the Old Testament it was a faith that looked ahead to a coming Messiah. Since Jesus, our faith looks back to the Messiah who came and died for us. But it is that faith that saves and changes our hearts. Baptism, like circumcision, is just an outward sign of the inward, spiritual reality.

***So, what is YOUR reality?*** What is your true condition? It is very possible to LOOK LIKE a good church-going Christian but actually be faking it. Hypocrites were common in Jesus’ day and are still common today. Jesus closed the sermon on the mount with this very severe warning:

1. Assess your true **Condition**
	* Are you a true **Israelite**?

“On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’” Matthew 7:22-23

***These are not just casual church-goers.*** These are people prophesying, preaching in Jesus’ name, they are casting out demons and doing miracles in the name of Jesus. But their hearts were not devoted to him. He didn’t know them because they didn’t know him. They were serving themselves or some other agenda. So even their religious works were considered lawlessness, evil, to the Lord.

That is the first exhortation of this letter to Smyrna. Start with diagnosis. Height, weight, blood pressure. Get on the treadmill and stress test the old ticker. But the Lord’s focus here is inside, spiritual reality. How is your HEART? How are you really doing spiritually? Second exhortation.

**Exhortations from Jesus:**

1. Do not fear **Physical** suffering

“Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold the devil is about to throw some of you into prison…” Revelation 2:10

The verse before Jesus said, “I know your tribulation.” So this church was already suffering. They were already being persecuted. But something more intense was coming. That’s what the whole book of Revelation is about – the “things that are soon to come.” For the early church several waves of persecution had already come.

Church tradition documents ***ten significant waves of persecution***, probably patterned after the 10 plagues in Egypt or the 10 days signified in this letter.



It wasn’t until the end of the third century that persecution spread throughout the entire Roman Empire. Usually it was smaller and more localized attacks, like the martyrdom of Polycarp with a prominent individual being singled out.

One scholar theorized that the last ten years of the persecution started by Diocletian, from 302-312, could be the 10 days Jesus had in mind when he spoke to the church in Smyrna.

**Exhortations from Jesus:**

1. Do not fear **Physical** suffering
	* God **Restricts** and redeems the attacks of the enemy

“Behold the devil is about to throw some of you into prison… and for ten days you will have tribulation.” Revelation 2:10

One of the principles for all suffering, but for persecution in particular, is that God restricts, directs, controls and redeems everything we go through. ***Everything we experience is overseen by the Lord Himself.*** Notice I don’t say “CAUSED” for God is never the cause of evil. “God himself tempts no one,” because His whole nature is good. But God uses temptation, trials and tribulations for His good purposes, in the mystery of divine providence.

Here we see “ten days” of tribulation for this particular church. I have no doubt there were ten literal days of suffering for this local body of believers. But the message for all believers is that “***In this world you will have trouble***. You will have tribulation” Jesus said, “But take heart, I have overcome the world.”

So, the exhortation from the Lord Jesus is **DO NOT FEAR physical suffering**. Do not fear death itself. The sting of death has been removed by the one who conquered sin and death forever.

We got to know a young couple in Kentucky one Easter, just a few weeks before he was set to deploy to Afghanistan with the Army. I was preaching through Luke and they happened to come one Sunday when we were in Luke 12 for a sermon entitled, “What not to Fear.” I never remember my sermons much less my sermon titles, but the Lord used this one in a special way. At this point in Jesus’ public ministry opposition was growing. The Jewish leaders were getting more aggressive in attacking Jesus, so he told his followers:

1. Do not fear **Physical** suffering
	* God **Restricts** and redeems the attacks of the enemy

“I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do.” Luke 12:4

What’s the worst they can do to you? Kill your body? Is that it? Phaw. That’s nothing to worry about. They can’t touch your SOUL. They can’t harm the real you – the part that will last forever.

This sweet young couple was terrified of Afghanistan. It was a dangerous war. Very unstable. It was a 9 month deployment. They weren’t yet married. Would he come back? They had lots of reasons to fear. But the Lord spoke to them through this passage, calling them to trust in Him.

1. Do not fear **Physical** suffering
	* God **Restricts** and redeems the attacks of the enemy

“But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!” Luke 12:5

***Who is Jesus talking about here?*** Who has the authority to both kill physically and cast people into hell? At the time those listening would have assumed he meant God, which was a good assumption. But looking back we know Jesus was talking about HIMSELF. “All authority in heaven and on earth” has been given to Jesus. He is the One who will judge all people and assign them to their eternal destiny.

So don’t fear anything physical in this world. The primary way God restricts our suffering is by protecting us SPIRITUALLY in Christ. And He not only restricts and controls the suffering, He redeems it, using it for good.

1. Do not fear **Physical** suffering
	* Tribulation tests and develops your **Character**

“Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested.” Revelation 2:10

Twice in the New Testament we are commanded to ***rejoice in our sufferings***. Three other times Paul instructs us to “rejoice in the Lord ALWAYS.” This makes no sense from a physical perspective, limited only by this short life and this world. It only makes sense when you factor in God and eternity.

Testing has two purposes. First, it shows what we’re really made of. And second, it makes us stronger and better. “For a little while,” Peter says:

* + Tribulation tests and develops your **Character**

“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

The tested genuineness of your faith. ***That is what suffering reveals.*** That is what pain exposes. That is what tribulation tests: if our faith is real. And when it comes through like pure gold it results in praise, glory and honor for the Lord Jesus. Because it proves to a watching universe that Jesus is worthy. He is worth more than our comfort and our preferences. He is worth any amount of suffering and loss in this world, because we have all of forever to be with Him.

 2. Tribulation tests and develops your **Character**

“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” James 1:2-4

Look at what trials and testing produce: ***endurance, steadfast perseverance.*** Unshakeable faith. Longsuffering commitment. And look at the result: perfection, maturity, completion – lacking in nothing.

What are you lacking right now? Patience? Perseverance? Hope? Maturity? Unselfishness?

We are all lacking in plenty of areas. ***Testing and tribulation refine and purify us.***

That’s what happened for the couple in Kentucky. The hardship of being shipped to Afghanistan; the danger and fear; the difficulty of being separated. All of that stripped away their naive self-sufficiency and opened them up to their need for Jesus. For the young man, he came back to his childhood faith. For the young woman, it was a longer process, but in time the Lord won her over too.

They got through that time of separation. He came back, they got married, and now have three little boys. They were terrified of Afghanis and bullets and bombs. But God showed them not to fear petty little things like that, but rather to get to know Jesus. And all the other fears and concerns faded away in the peace and love and joy of Jesus.

So Jesus exhorts us to first assess our true condition, then to not fear physical suffering. Third:

**Exhortations from Jesus:**

1. Be faithful to the **End**
	* Trust in Jesus, who conquered **Death**

“The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.” Revelation 2:8

As we are tested through trials and tribulations, we will grow in our steadfastness and maturity and that will enable us to be strong to the end as we fix our faith in Jesus.

**When you know Jesus** and realize who He actually is, all other worries and concerns fade into their proper, insignificant place. The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom because it brings to light the foolishness of all other fears.

Jesus is the Creator of all things. He made the ocean and the clouds; He controls the lightning and the hurricanes. He made the great sea creatures and the dinosaurs; he can handle a little dictator over here and a tyrant over there. He can move the heart and hands of a surgeon. He can guide the attention of an administrator. He can shift a policy, change a situation. He is the first and the last.

***And He is the Risen One.*** We know he can heal any disease and fix any problem. The test of faith is when He doesn’t choose to fix things physically. That is when we have to trust Him; especially when we don’t understand the reasons.

**But what we do know is who Jesus is**. He is the Lamb of God who died in our place. He is the Righteous Son of God who became sin, taking all of our wickedness into His human body as He died on the cross. He is the conquering warrior who defeated death itself. And He is the Judge who is coming to evaluate the thoughts and actions of all people, assigning them to their eternal just desserts.

This Jesus is the One who tells us:

**Exhortations from Jesus:**

1. Be faithful to the **End**
	* Trust in Jesus, who conquered **Death**

“Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.” Revelation 2:10

***What’s the worst they can do to us?*** They can kill us. And that just sends us directly to Jesus; straight to heaven. They can’t really kill us. They can only send us home. Death is not the end. I say that at every Christian funeral. Death is not the end; it is the beginning of the life we were truly made for. Your loved one who died in Christ is not dead, they are more fully alive than they ever were in this life.

Jesus has a crown of life: a reward in recognition for your faithful service. So keep going a little longer. Hold on. Persevere. Remain faithful, whatever the test.

**Exhortations from Jesus:**

1. Be faithful to the **End**
	* Rejoice in His promise of everlasting **Life**

“The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.” Revelation 2:11

Like all the letters, this one ends with a message for those with ears to hear. Just as Jesus did in his earthly ministry, so He speaks right now to those who are spiritually able to pay attention. The Spirit is speaking to the churches. Are we listening?

There are promises in all of these letters, but notice who the promises are for: the one who CONQUERS. ***Those who OVERCOME.***

We are not those who shrink back and give up. We are not cowards who, in the final exam, fall short of our confidence in Christ. We are those who stand firm and endure. We are those who know the glory of Jesus and hold fast to Him no matter what.

***The promise of this letter is eternal life***: to be invincible, unhurtable by the second death. The first death is PHYSICAL. All of us will go through that unless Jesus comes back sooner. But the second death is SPIRITUAL. The second death is hell. The lake of fire. Eternal punishment, eternal darkness and misery.

**Those who OVERCOME** in Christ will not be touched by the second death. As those united with Jesus, the giver of LIFE, we will LIVE for the endless ages of eternity in His kingdom. More than that we will REIGN with Him forever and ever.

**Exhortations from Jesus:**

1. Assess your true **Condition**
	* Are you rich or poor in God’s **Kingdom**?
	* Are you a true **Israelite**?
2. Do not fear **Physical** suffering
	* God **Restricts** and redeems the attacks of the enemy
	* Tribulation tests and develops your **Character**
3. Be faithful to the **End**
	* Trust in Jesus, who conquered **Death**
	* Rejoice in His promise of everlasting **Life**

***So what is your current condition?*** Are you spiritually rich? Or are you poor when it comes to spiritual things?

***How is your heart?*** Are you fearful? Are you stressed out and worried about the things of this world? Or are you so gripped by the glory and goodness of the Lord Jesus that all other concerns fade away for you? Have you learned how to rejoice in suffering because it draws you closer to Jesus?

Be faithful. **Stand firm in the Lord**. Hold fast to the One who conquered death and fix your hope in His promise of eternal life. He is coming soon!

Let’s pray.