"BE FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH"

(Smyrna: The Suffering Church)
REVELATION 2:8-11
2-20-2022



INTRODUCTION:

***No matter how intense the pressures may get, we must be faithful right to the end!**

How can we remain faithful?

I. REMEMBER CHRIST'S <u>EXAMPLE OF VICTORY</u> (v. 8)

II. REMEMBER CHRIST'S <u>WORDS OF COMFORT</u> (v. 9-10)

A. "I Know" (v. 9)

1. Jesus knows the <u>works</u> you have done for Him
2. Jesus knows the <u>affliction</u> you have endured for Him
3. Jesus knows the <u>material necessities</u> you have sacrificed for Him

B. "Fear Not" (v. 10)

1. Fear can be conquered when we <u>know what to expect</u>
2. Fear can be conquered when we <u>know why trials come our way</u>
3. Fear can be conquered when we <u>know the ultimate outcome of our lives</u>

III. REMEMBER CHRIST'S <u>PROMISE OF REWARD</u> (v. 10b-11)

A. <u>A crown of life</u> for the faithful (v. 10b)

B. <u>Deliverance from the second death</u> for the overcomers (v. 11)

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INTRODUCTION:

Throughout history, Christians who have taken a stand for their faith in Jesus Christ have suffered for it.

The local church at Smyrna would have to be called the forerunner of suffering.

Today, the church of Smyrna is behind the iron curtain in Russia, and behind the bamboo curtain in China. (Straus, p. 45).

Smyrna - Even their name hinted at the bitter suffering they were facing. The name Smyrna means "bitterness."

Smyrna was a major political center for Rome. In 195 B.C., Smyrna built the first temple in Asia dedicated tot he worship of the Roman government. In A.D. 26 Smyrna was chosen to erect a temple in honor of Tiberius Caesar.

While Rome had unified much of the known world by the roads she built; the "peace" she provided, and by the law she enforced, the last unifying force was to be religious in nature.

Each year every citizen had to appear in the temple, burn incense on the altar and repeat the formula, "Caesar is Lord."

Christians, however, believed that the word "lord" was reserved only for Christ. Saying "Christ is Lord" meant to them "Christ is God." The choice was, therefore, idolatry or persecution.

"One famous leader to die because of this custom was Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna. In A.D. 155, he was brought before the authorities and given the choice of worshiping Caesar or being put to death. The proconsul pleaded with him to save his life by denying Christ and promised to set him free. Polycarp replied, "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King and Savior?" Although it happened on the Sabbath, the Jews were so eager to see him die they violated their own Sabbath laws by carrying wood into the stadium for the fire. That afternoon POlycarp was burned to death. This persecution was coming on the church when John wrote his letter about sixty years earlier. Polycarp, still a young man, may have been one of the members addressed in the letter."

(Marshal Neal, Seven Churches, BJU Press, p. 28).
(cp. "The Martyrdom of Polycarp", The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. I, pp. 37-44)

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How can we remain faithful?

I. REMEMBER CHRIST'S <u>EXAMPLE OF VICTORY</u> (v. 8)

Jesus addresses the suffering Smyrna church with this most comforting description of Himself.

Remember, He encouraged John (who greatly feared when He saw the glorified Christ) with the same words: SEE Rev. 1:17-18

The phrase "The first and the last" points to Christ's eternal nature, and identifies Him as Jehovah God. Isaiah 44:6 - "Thus saith the Lord the king of Israel, and his redeemer the Lord of hosts: I am the first and the last; and beside me there is no God."

Jesus is "the Alpha and Omega; the beginning and the ending." (Rev. 1:8).

Nothing existed before Him in eternity past, and nothing will surpass Him in eternity future.

Yet this One <u>entered into death</u>!

"Was dead and is alive" =

"Was dead" = Jesus became dead or entered into death.

"Is alive" = He lived (again). Pointing to His resurrection

Death is not the end for the child of God, just as death was not the end for the Son of God.

For the believer, death is not the end, but the beginning.

Christ's resurrection gives believers (EX: the martyred Smyrna Christians) confidence of a resurrection.

Because of the believer's union "in Christ," we have the assurance that His resurrection is also our resurrection.

Our Spirit baptism, which occurred the moment we believed, united us inseparably into Christ and all that He <u>did</u> for us and <u>has</u> for us (cp. Rom. 6:3-8; Col. 2:12, 13).

His death for sin became our death to sin.
His righteousness became our righteousness (II Cor. 5:21).
His resurrection became our resurrection (Col. 3:1).
His inheritance became our inheritance (Rom. 8:17 - "joint heirs")

We can sing, "O death where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? . . . But thanks be to God which given us the victory <u>through</u> our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Cor. 15:55, 57).

II. REMEMBER CHRIST'S WORDS OF COMFORT (v. 9-10)

A. "I Know" (v. 9)

When suffering, it is a real comfort to know that someone else knows and is concerned. It lightens the burden. To bear burdens alone (to feel that no one knows or cares) makes the weight unbearable.

However, sometimes when others say "I know what you are going through" - we wonder, "Do you really?"

Never forget that our omniscient Lord does know!

(EX: Hymn, "Never a Friend Like Jesus")

1. Jesus knows the works you have done for Him

Although others may not know. Although others may forget. God knows and remembers what we do for Him.

(Heb. 6:10 - "For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labor of love, which ye have shewed toward His name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister."

2. Jesus knows the affliction you have endured for Him

"Tribulation" = pressure, trouble, affliction.

The tribulation in view is due to opposition for the faith (cp. v. 10)

Jesus knows when His children are mocked, ridiculed, threatened,
discriminated against, and abused.

3. Jesus knows the material necessities you have sacrificed for Him

"Poverty" - does not refer to someone who goes without luxuries, but to someone who goes without even the necessities. It means extreme poverty.

The Smyrna church, when persecuted, was stripped of even the necessities of life, yet she had that which could not be stolen.

It is a paradox (seeming contradiction) to be at the same time poor and yet rich. Paul said that as a servant of Christ he was "as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things" (II Cor. 6:10).

In the physical realm, you may not have much (don't envy others who do), but in the spiritual realm you are wealthy beyond measure (never forget: This is our "real estate.").

How is the believer rich?

a. He is rich in faith (Ja. 2:5a)

b. He is rich by inheritance (Ja. 2:5b) (cp. Eph. 1:3ff)

Question: Are these Gentiles claiming to be Jews; or Jews who were not true Jews? (i.e. physical descendants of Abraham, but not spiritual descendants)?

Answer: Jews who were not real Jews.

A true Jew, according to Romans 2:28, 29, was not one who "is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God."

These Jews, however, were not real. The Jews instigated persecution against Christians (the early church) everywhere they went.

B. "Fear Not" (v. 10)

"Lo, I am with you always." (Mt. 28:20)

"I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee, So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me" (Heb. 13:5, 6).

1. Fear can be conquered when we know what to expect

Fear is hard to control when you are caught off guard; or caught by surprise.

Jesus warns the Smyrna church that the devil (slanderer) was about to throw some from among their number into prison (NOTE: how Satan is responsible for deeds of wicked that his tools [people] perform).

Tribulation (to one degree or another) is part of being a Christian.

--Jesus prepared His disciples for tribulation - John 16:33 - "These things I have spoken unto you, that in Me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

--Paul prepared the churches he established for tribulation -

Acts 14:22 - "Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God."

I Th. 3:3 - "That no man should be moved by these afflictions: for yourselves know that we are appointed thereunto."

II Tim. 3:12 - "Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution."

--Peter prepared the churches he wrote to for tribulation -I Pet. 4:12 - "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you"

2. Fear can be conquered when we <u>know why trials come our way</u>

a. From Satan's standpoint:
He sends tests so that you will <u>fail</u> (EX: Job)

b. From God's standpoint:
He allows tests so that you will <u>pass</u>

All tests are first and foremost tests of our <u>faith</u>.

When a test comes, it is ultimately aimed at our "<u>faith</u>".

James 1:3 - "Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience."

SEE I Peter 1:3-9 (*v. 7)

When our obedience (love, patience, etc.) is tested, our <u>faith</u> determines whether or not we pass.

NOTE: Tests are not for the benefit of God seeing whether or not our faith is genuine, but for us to see, as well as for Him to be glorified.

Job proclaimed: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him." He knew the purpose of trials as evidenced by his words: "He knoweth the way that I take: when He hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold."

Some commentators believe that the reference to "ten days" refers to "ten periods of time" - that is, ten periods of persecution from Nero (A.D. 64) to Diocletian (A.D. 316). (Epp, Ryrie, Smith).

The better view, however, is to take the word days in a literal sense, just as the church described is a literal church.

3. Fear can be conquered when we <u>know the ultimate outcome of our lives</u>

We know the final score!

<u>Life</u> awaits the believer.

We don't pass from life to death, but life to life!

This is why God is so careful not to merely refer to departed believers as dead, but "asleep" (Acts 7:60; I Th. 4:13-15, etc.).

"Be faithful" - be full of faith.

Full of faith in what? In God's faithfulness.

We need faith in God's faithfulness.

We can only be faithful when we are convinced that God is faithful.

When John Chrysostom (ca. 347-407) was brought before the empress Eudoxia, she threatened him with banishment if he insisted on his Christian independence as a preacher.

> "You cannot banish me, for this world is my Father's house."
> "But I will kill you," said the empress.
> "No, you cannot, for my life is hid with Christ in God," said John.
> "I will take away your treasures."
> "No, you cannot, for my treasure is in heaven and my heart is there."
> "But I will drive you away from your friends and you will have no one left."
> "No, you cannot, for I have a Friend in heaven from whom you cannot separate me.
> I defy you, for there is nothing you can do to harm me."

"Persecution was never a defeat for the true followers of God anymore than death on the cross was a defeat for Christ" (Prisoner Bulletin, summer, 1987, p. 23).

III. REMEMBER CHRIST'S PROMISE OF REWARD (v. 10b-11)

A. A crown of life for the faithful (v. 10b)

A crown ("stephanos") was a victor's wreath made out of pine, given to the winner of an athletic event. This was corruptible (I Cor. 9:25); ours will be incorruptible.

Our crown "fadeth not away" (I Pet. 5:4).

--God has a crown of glory for faithful pastors (I Pet. 5:4).
--God has a crown of righteousness for those who love His appearing (II Tim. 4:8).
--God has a crown of life for those who endure testing because of a love for Christ (James 1:12 - "Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love Him."

B. Deliverance from the second death for the overcomers (v. 11)

"Churches" (plural) - the promises are not limited to the Smyrna church, but extend to all Biblical churches up to the present.

"He that overcometh" - he who is victorious; he who conquers.

In context, the overcoming involves triumphing over suffering - being faithful unto death.

The believer's faithfulness is not what saves him, rather it is the grand mark or proof that he indeed was saved!

This does not mean that we lived perfectly faithful every day without ever lapsing into seasons of unfaithfulness.

What it does mean is that when we are tested specifically for our faith in Christ we won't deny Him. If pressured into renouncing Christ, the believer will stand true.

EX: Balthazar Hubmaier, who under pressure did at first recant, but later stood firm in his testimony and died for Christ.

"Shall not be hurt" (emphatic - double negative)
"will by no means (not at all) be hurt (injured) by the second death."

The point is this: No one who is faithful unto dying once, will die twice! This reference to deliverance from the second death is in contrast to the death mentioned in verse 11.

We may suffer here, but here is where it ends!

For unbelievers, suffering may be avoided in this life, but it will be unavoidable at death, and unceasing throughout eternity.

"Blessed and holy is the that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power" (Rev. 20:6)

The final outcome of all unbelievers is the second death, which is the lake of fire (SEE Rev. 20:14, 15; 21:8).

CONCLUSION:

*No matter how intense the pressures may get, we must be faithful right to the end!

How can we remain faithful?

1. Remember Christ's example of victory

2. Remember Christ's words of comfort

3. Remember Christ's promise of reward