

WORDS OF COMFORT FROM CHRIST

HOW TO OVERCOME FEAR AND MAINTAIN FAITHFULNESS IN TIMES OF STRESS

Text: Revelation 2:8-11

INTRODUCTION:

Revelation 2-3 are comprised of *seven letters to seven churches* from the risen, ascended, and enthroned Christ. They have a three-fold *interpretation* and *application*. First, these letters contain a *contemporary message* to the church in that day. Second, they contain a *comprehensive picture* of the church throughout history. Third, they contain a *current message* to every church in any age about the Christ and His sufficiency for every situation we face.

- The message to Ephesus was a message to a *formal* church.
- The message to Pergamum was a message to a *faltering* church.
- The message to Thyatira was a message to a *false* church.
- The message to Sardis was a message to a *fruitless* church.
- The message to Philadelphia was a message to a *feeble* church.
- The message to Laodicea was a message to a *fashionable* church.

Of the seven churches, only two are not rebuked. One is the church at Philadelphia. The other was this church: the church at Smyrna. It is a message to a *fearful, but faithful church*. As the Lord speaks to this church, He speaks to us about *how to overcome fear and maintain faithfulness in times of stress*.

This letter is all *light*, with no *darkness*, all *sweetness* with no *bitterness*, all *music* in a major key with no minor cord. Every word that Jesus said to this church was *comforting* and *encouraging*. He only commends and encourages them. Even His silence is significant.

As I reflected on this, I thought, what would be like to be a person who could stand in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ, and from Him, hear only words of commendation? What would it be like to be a part of a church that Jesus gave no rebuke to, only the promise of reward?

It was a *poor* church, but Jesus calls it *rich*. It is beset with *opposition*, but it has the Lord for its firm *foundation*. The watchword of this letter is "**fear not!**" The keynote is, *be fearless and be faithful for the Lord is for you when you are with Him!*

THE SETTING:

What do we know about this city and the occasion for which this word is given? The city of Smyrna received its name from one of the principal commercial products that were sold there, which was a gum resin taken from a shrubby tree called *myrrh*. The Greek word *Smurna* is actually a word of Semitic origin, the Hebrew root meaning "*bitter*." It was used as an ingredient in making perfume (*Ps.45:8*), and one of the ingredients of the holy anointing oil for the priests (*Ex.30:23*); for the purification of women (*Esth.2:12*), and for embalming (*John 19:39*).

It is significant that our Lord spoke as He did to the assembly at Smyrna, for this church was in the midst of bitter sorrow and suffering. Myrrh was associated with Christ at His first coming. You recall

that after His birth, the wise men came and presented to the Lord gifts of "gold and frankincense and myrrh" (Matt.2:11). The gold spoke of His royalty. Frankincense spoke of His deity, and myrrh spoke of His suffering humanity.

When Jesus was hanging on the cross, they offered Him to drink "wine mingled with myrrh" (Mark 15:23). It was Nicodemus who assisted Joseph of Arimathea in taking the body of Jesus and preparing it for burial by applying "a mixture of myrrh and aloes" (John 19:39-40). This all applied to the first coming of Christ. But when Christ comes again in royalty with His unveiled deity, there is no mention of *myrrh* (Is.60:6). For Christ, the writer of Hebrews says, "having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him" (Heb.9:26-28). Then He will appear as the mighty Sovereign, not the Sufferer.

The city of Smyrna itself was large, beautiful, and wealthy. This city was situated in the same district of Western Turkey in what was then the Roman province of Asia Minor. Some forty miles to the north of Ephesus, Smyrna stands at the head of one of the finest bays in the world. It was called, "the lovely one," "the crown of Ionia," and "the ornament of Asia." It was one of seven cities that claimed to be the birthplace of the legend poet of Greece, *the famous Homer*. According to Strabo, a geographer and a contemporary with Jesus, Smyrna was actually the first planned city in the Roman Empire. The streets were planned with their intersections, as well as the views and vistas of the beautiful location. The lands lying around were very fertile, bearing grapes in abundance. It was destroyed by an earthquake, but rebuilt under Alexander between 301 and 281 B.C. It became a matter of pride among the inhabitants that their city had died, but was alive again. Politically, Smyrna became the faithful ally of Rome. It still exists and retains much of its old prosperity. To sum it all up, Smyrna was a place of *history*, a place of *beauty*, a place of *loyalty*, and a place of *hostility*.

EXPOSITION:

There are *seven words of comfort and encouragement* that our Lord gives to this church, and to every church that is troubled by opposition and persecution. The question we want to answer from this text is: **What do we need to know in order to overcome fear and remain faithful in times of distress?**

A. WE HAVE A LIVING SAVIOR WHO IS OVER ALL. (v.8)

- **Verse 8**—"And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life says this..."

To this poor and struggling church, Jesus presents Himself as *the Creator and the Conqueror*. Right up front, our Lord claims, once again, *His undiminished deity!* Jesus is not someone less than God, but one with the Father in essence, glory, and power.

The title of being "**the first and the last**" was the unmistakable claim of the God of Israel in Isaiah 48:12—"Listen to Me, O Jacob, even Israel whom I called; I am He, I am the first, I am also the last."

The Old Testament commentator, Alec Motyer, says,

"As first God was not pressed by any external agency into what He initiated; as last He stands unchallenged by any force that may have tried to oppose; and He brings to triumphant conclusion

what He started. At the start, there was His uninhibited freedom to do as He chose; at the end, the untarnished gold of His completed work."¹

Do you see how fitting this description is to those in the heat of battle? To this city that was more than a 1000 years old, He says, "*I am the first and the last...*" the Alpha and Omega, before there was a Smyrna, "*I AM*," when the city is in ashes, "*I WILL BE*," before there was a Rome, "*I RULED*," when Rome is gone, "*I WILL BE LORD*." He identifies Himself to them as "*the first and the last*," regardless of what their history was. This is true of us as well.

Application: Some to whom I speak now, are constantly defeated by a checkered past or even by a present foe. You live in the prison-house of hidden fear, and the truth be told, one of the greatest fears that you have is being *without*: without *health*, without *wealth*, or without *friends*. What does Jesus want you to know? He wants you to know that the key to overcoming your fear and maintaining faithfulness in times of stress is *knowing Him!*

This title of Christ being "*the first and the last*" is intended to say to them and us, be encouraged by the One whose name transcends all limitations of time and space. Christ is the First *in the dawn of creation*, and the Last *at the end of creation*. And what this means is that in every trial we have, we can rest assured that Jesus is at the beginning of it—not as its cause, but as its Approver—and He will be at the *end* of it and *all the way through it*—because He is the First and the Last.

Yet, to this, He adds, "**who was dead and has come to life.**" The tenses of the verb lead us to translate this, "*who was dead* but has sprang back to life." Literally, this can be translated, "*I was a corpse!*" But then, in an instant, "*I sprang back to life!*"

Over against the backdrop of this city, the significance is seen. The city had once been destroyed, and then it sprang back to life, so to speak, under the Marcus Aurelius.

What was *apparent*, and what was *real* were two different things. The city seemed to be dead, but it was alive, but to those who persecuted the church, it seemed that the community which began with life, was now being snuffed out in death. But the church is a church of a living Lord! Jesus knows what it is to taste death. There is no depth that He has not *fathomed*, no darkness that He has not *penetrated*. He is alive—but He has conquered death. He reigns! Death has been robbed of its sting, and the grave has been stripped of its power.

- **1 Corinthians 15:55-57**—O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?" ⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; ⁵⁷ but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

B. WE HAVE A LIVING SAVIOR WHO KNOWS ALL. (v.9a)

- **Verse 9a**—"I know your tribulation..."

The Lord uses three words to describe the suffering of this church in verse 9. The first is *tribulation* (v.9a), the second is *poverty* (v.9b), and the third is *blasphemy* (v.9c). The word for "**tribulation**" here is *thlipsis*; it means *pressure*. It describes the kind of pressure a man feels if he

¹ J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction Commentary*, p.380

has a heavy rock placed on his chest, which is about to crush him to death. It was a constant, uninterrupted pressure from the pagan world around them.

Jesus says, "I know your tribulation, your pressure...the squeeze and heavy weight you feel in your current environment." Now, how does this help us? It is encouraging to know that when we are facing some dark hour of trouble, we have a friend who can put His arm around our shoulders and say, "I know, brother...I know, sister!" But it's quite another thing to have someone in a position of authority to take to you by the hand and say, "I know, I sympathize, I understand, I am standing by you in this, you can count on Me." There is no tear, no pain, no heartache, or no trouble that our Lord does not share with His children. He says, "I know!" (*oida*). To the other churches, Jesus begins by saying, "I know your works." But to this church, He says, "**I know your tribulation.**" I know it, and I understand it, and I can comfort you in it.

Now, here is the second principle that will aid you in overcoming your fears, and that is, the Lord Jesus not only has an awareness of what you're going through, but He can relate. And though some may look down upon you, despise you, and berate you, your pain, your pressure, and your trouble are known to *Jesus*. And the mere fact that the One who matters most recognizes you, this, my dear friend, will strengthen your resolve to be fearless and faithful.

C. WE HAVE A LIVING SAVIOR WHO ESTIMATES IT ALL. (v.9b)

- **Verse 9b**—"I know your tribulation and your poverty (but thou art rich)..."

The **poverty** (*ptocheia*) that is spoken of here is the same abject poverty that the believers in Macedonia had, which Paul speaks about in His second letter to the Corinthians. It means so *poor that you are reduced to the status of begging to survive.* Jesus is no stranger to poverty. "He was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that you through His poverty might be rich" (2 Cor.8:9). He was born in a borrowed stable. Early in His ministry, he said, "the foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man hath no where to lay His head" (Matt.8:20).

Yet, in spite of their poverty, Jesus said they were *rich*. Rich how? In what? This is one of the many paradoxes in the Bible. In 2 Corinthians 6:10, we read, "having nothing, yet possessing all things." 1 Corinthians 3:21, "...for all things belong to you...." To themselves, and surely the outside world, these believers seemed to be at the bottom of the barrel! Yet Jesus calls them to take a spiritual inventory! Dear friends, five minutes in glory will make up for a lifetime of suffering on earth! The world took away their *jobs*, but they could not take away their *joy*. The businessman sought to ban them from making a *living*, but they could not stop them from *praising* and *loving* the Lord of Glory! The world may say you have *nothing*, but Jesus sees your *real value* and says that *you are rich*. Rich how? Rich in *the favor of God*. Rich in *the love of God*. Rich in *the gifts of the Holy Spirit*. Rich in *knowledge*. Rich in *comfort*. Rich in *help*.

Who can sing, "All night, all day, angels watching over me, my Lord"? You can, if you are a Christian, because, in Hebrews 1:14, angels are "sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation." In Hebrews 2:16, we read, "For assuredly He does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the descendant of Abraham"—that is, spiritual children of Abraham.

In James 2:5, we read, "Did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?" Here, we are taught the timeless truth that we

need to see our lives in view of God's Word. For in the Word of God, riches such as silver and gold, are considered to be *corruptible things* (1 Pet.1:18), but He regards faith, hope, and love as durable riches, and we have been redeemed by the precious blood of Christ.

Here we also discover that Christ values His church in light of what they are, as well as according to what they do. Let us ask ourselves, *do we count spiritual wealth greater riches than all of the glittering, material wealth of this present world?* Can you sing with the hymn writer...

I'd rather have Jesus, than anything this world affords today.^{2?}

We have a living Savior who is *over all*.

We have a living Savior who *knows all*.

We have a living Savior who *estimates all*.

D. WE HAVE A LIVING SAVIOR WHO FORESEES IT ALL. (v.10a)

- **Verse 10a**—*"Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison"*

Imagine being foretold of a *particular trial of suffering* that is coming upon you tomorrow. What would you do? Naturally, we would seek to find a way around it or seek to avoid it altogether. No man in his right mind wants to suffer. But in the Christian life, the choice to suffer for Christ is to be made at the beginning of the journey (Phil.1:29).

Never forget, dear ones, that the call to follow Christ is not only a call to take and trust Him with your life, it is also a call to take up a cross daily and follow Him (Luke 9:23). Many today would have *Jesus*, but *without His cross*. They would take Him as *Savior*, but not as *Lord*. But this is impossible. To have Jesus is to take everything that comes with Him.

Jesus tells these believes that they were **"about to suffer"** more heavily than ever. The enemy will seem to prevail—some of them are to be **"thrown into prison."** Now, what did this mean?

You must keep in mind that the Roman Empire did not *imprison people for punishment as we do*. Today, if you go to prison, you still get three square meals, health and dental benefits, recreation privileges, and the opportunity to still get an education. This was not the case in ancient Rome. Every man who was in prison in that day was there awaiting either trial or his death. His trial would end in *acquittal, scourging, a fine, exile, or death*.

When these words came to this tiny church, they knew exactly what this meant. Now, I don't know what you are going through or about to go through, but take courage, dear friends, that Jesus knows, He cares, and He can do something about it.

The persecution of Christians here is regarded as the work of the evil one—**"the devil."** Here Jesus affirms the existence of a real devil. The word *"devil"* means *slanderer*. The word Satan means *an adversary*. Paul's thorn in the flesh was *"a messenger of Satan"* (2 Cor.12:7). He wanted to do this or that, but Satan hindered. Satan tries for a bad purpose. God tests for a good one. Satan seeks to destroy our faith. God promises to strengthen our faith. Satan comes in the blast.

² Rhea F. Miller, *I'd Rather Have Jesus*

God stays near to bless. All of this is foreseen by Christ. Not one trial comes upon you that is *unforeseen* and *unprovided* for by God.

Erasmus confessed that he was not constituted of that stuff of which martyrs are made, and many of you might feel the same way. You look around at the commitment of others, and you say, "I don't know if I could endure like them." Dear friends, *if you resolve to be on the Lord's side*, then He will wonderfully *strengthen* and *deliver* you in the time of trouble.

It is said that the golden-crested wren is one of the tiniest birds in the world. It is said only to weigh one-fifth of an ounce, and yet, with its frail wings, it can survive a hurricane and fly across the northern seas. When we see things like this in nature, it is God's way of teaching us a lesson: God's power works best through the smallest vessel. Grace is put on display in a greater way in the lives of the *weak*, but trusting, saint!

The next time you feel fearful and weak, tell it to Jesus.

Now let us, Have a little talk with Jesus,
Let us, tell Him all about our troubles,
He will, Hear our faintest cry, And He will, answer by and by;
Now when you, Feel a little pray'r wheel turning,
And you, know a little fire is burning.
You will, Find a little talk with Jesus makes it right.³

E. WE HAVE A LIVING SAVIOR WHO LIMITS IT ALL. (v.10b)

- **Verse 10b**—"*Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days...*"

The fiery trial at this church in Smyrna needs to be viewed in three ways: from **the human perspective**, from **the satanic perspective**, and from **the divine perspective**. On *the human level*, we see *the misery*. God never promises that His people will not suffer and face violent opposition and even bodily injury from the world (*John 16:33*). From the satanic level, we see *mystery*. The mystery is not that Satan hates the church and seeks to kill, steal, and destroy. This is no mystery. The mystery is that *He who upholds the universe, also allows Satan to attack*. That's the mystery. But on the divine level, we see *ministry*. There was a purpose for this trial, and two factors are given to us that demonstrate why God permits storms.

1. The divine reason for it. "**So that you will be tested**" (*peirazo*), which means *to be put to the test in order to ascertain the nature of something*, including the *imperfections*, faults, or other qualities.

Now, what is coming out of the test that the Lord has allowed you to be in with this pandemic? What is it revealing to you about the imperfections of your heart, the faults in your thinking, or the quality of your faith?

³ Cleavant Derricks, *Just a Little Talk With Jesus*

2. The divine restriction to it. **"You will have tribulation for ten days..."** You recall that while in captivity, Daniel asked the king's commander to test him and his friends for "ten days..." (*Dan.1:12, 14*). Ten days simply denotes a short time—a little while. Friends, in the grand scheme of things, the testing that we go through in this world is but a second on the clock of eternity.
 - **1 Peter 5:10**—After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen *and* establish you.

Our Savior is *over all*.

Our Savior *knows all*.

Our Savior *estimates it all*.

Our Savior *foresees it all*.

Our Savior *limits it all*.

F. WE HAVE A LIVING SAVIOR WHO COMFORTS THROUGH IT ALL. (v.10c)

- **Verse 10c**—"Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life."

Here we are given *the call to faithfulness* and *the reward of faithfulness*. Notice that this call to faithfulness was NOT a call to *be faithful to a creed, a code, a political party, or a good cause*. They were called to *be faithful to Christ!* The word "**faithful**" comes from the root word, which means *to be convinced*. How does a person become faithful?

Faithfulness is born of conviction, and conviction must have a groundwork and a foundation. What is the foundation of our faithfulness? In chapter 1, verse 5, Christ is said to be "*the faithful Witness*." What this means for us is that *our faithfulness rests in the faithfulness of Christ*. A deep conviction of His faithfulness produces our faithfulness. Christ was not telling His suffering servants to "*keep a stiff upper lip,*" or even to "*keep your chin up, grin and bear it, and keep smiling.*" No, no! That is nothing more than pop psychology. What He told them was to *depend on Him, to be convinced of Him, to let Him be their strength and courage*.

Paul had this idea in mind when he said to Timothy, "*For this reason I also suffer these things, but I am not ashamed [litotes—which means, I am really delighted]; for I know whom I have believed [not what, or why or how, but whom—a Person] and I am convinced [fully persuaded] that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him [deposited for safekeeping] until that day" (2 Tim.1:12).*

There are two reasons why we often fail to be faithful in times of temptation or persecution:

1. The first reason is that we are not convinced of *the sufficiency of Christ in every situation we face*. We have never become convinced that "*without Him we can do nothing*" (*John 15:5*).
2. The second reason is that *we have never come to the end of our own strength*. This is one of the first lessons the Lord seeks to teach us before He uses us in a great way. Have you come to the place of spiritual poverty? You can be too strong to be used, but you can never be too weak!

The statement "**be faithful until death**" does not mean: *be faithful until God calls you away*. It does not merely mean *as long as you live, don't give up*. Yes, this is true, but this statement

means more than that. It means *be faithful even though it cost you your life*. It is not so much pointing us to *the duration of faithfulness*, as much as *the intensity of faithfulness*. No soldier of the cross can win the fight or wear the honor as the victor who turns from the foe in the day of battle.

Illustration: There is a heroic story in ancient Greece of an old pilot who was sailing his boat in the crisis of a storm on the great Aegean Sea. During one of the crisis points, he stood on the deck and cried out to the pagan god, "Father Neptune, you may sink me if you will, or you may save me if you will, but whatever happens, I will keep my rudder straight and true." Now, we don't have to look to the lost world for our example, for we have a greater one in the life of a man named Job. At the heights of his despair, he said, "*Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him*" (Job 13:15).

All of us can say that. It is not up for us to decide our destiny. We do not know if we are going to be overcome by this trial or that temptation. We don't know how hard a trial will be once we get in it. But what we can say is this:

Sink me or save me, slay me or save me if you will, but whatever happens, I will keep my rudder true, I will cling to Christ, I will follow Him!

By God's grace, every Christian can say that.

The "**crown of life**" is one of the five crowns promised to faithful believers when Christ returns. There is *the incorruptible crown for self-mastery* (1 Cor.9:25), *the soul winner's crown* (Phil.4:19; 1 Thess.2:19), *the crown of righteousness* for loving His appearing (2 Tim.4:8), *the crown of glory* for shepherding God's sheep (1 Pet.5:4), and *the crown of life* (James 1:12) for enduring trials. These are not crowns to be worn on our heads in heaven, but rather to be presented to our Lord and laid at His feet.

One second after that crown touches our heads, we will cast it at the feet of Jesus—for He is worthy to be crowned with many crowns!

G. WE HAVE A LIVING SAVIOR WHO PROMISES LIFE AT THE END OF IT ALL. (v.11)

- **Verse 11**—"*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.*"

There is a *life beyond the present life*, and there is also a *death beyond the present death*. He who is born *twice* can die only *once*, but he who is *born only once* will *die twice*. If the first death leads to extinction, as false teachers say, then a second death would be impossible.

What does Jesus intend for us to hear, understand, and do? Your faithfulness is linked to His faithfulness. If He is the faithful One, how can those who claim to follow and know Him do any less?

CONCLUSION:

Beneath the city of Rome, there is a long succession of subterranean mazelike streets or tunnels quarried from the rocky strata of the soil. These galleries are now open, and strangers may visit them today. Historians consider them to be the most astonishing antique cemeteries in the world. They are called Catacombs—from the Greek *catacumbas*, which means underground graves. They are excavations or compartments dug into the sides of the walls that serve as tombs or burial places of the martyrs of the church in its infancy. During the time of the Roman Empire, when Christians were persecuted, they used the catacombs as a hideout. They built their churches underground and deposited their loved ones there with tears, in the full hope of life beyond the grave. In these low, underground catacombs, Christian art had its birth. The Ichthus symbol that we see on the cars today was born there.

The inscriptions in these antique tombs can be read, and some of them are so fresh that they seem to have been painted yesterday. They are passionate, touching, and affectionate. When John was writing the book of Revelation, many of these martyrs of the faith were being placed into these catacombs. One such martyr was the bishop of the church at Smyrna. He was believed to be the last man John ever spoke to before his exile to Patmos. He was a disciple of John, who went by the single name of Polycarp. Eleven years after this book of the Revelation was delivered to the churches, a fiery persecution broke out against the church.

Polycarp desired to stay at his post, awaiting the fate that threatened him, but his people compelled him to shelter himself in a quiet retreat, where he might, it was thought, safely hide. For a while, he remained undiscovered. He busied himself, we are told, with prayer and intercession for the persecuted church. At last, his enemies grabbed a child and, by torture, compelled the church to uncover the whereabouts of their bishop. Satisfied now that his hour had come, Polycarp refused to run, saying, *"the will of the Lord be done."*

As he came from an upper story of the house to meet his captors, immediately, he ordered that refreshments be served and as much food as they wanted. Then, he asked for one favor. He asked if they would grant him one hour of undisturbed prayer. It was granted. His heart was so full that he prayed for two straight hours! We are told that his captors were so touched by the old man's devotion that they pleaded with him to yield to the small demand to renounce Christ. Of course, the man of God refused. Rougher measures were taken, but they did not work. When Polycarp arrived at the amphitheater, the magistrate said to him, *"Curse, Christ, and I will set thee free!"* But the old bishop of Smyrna answered,

"Eighty and six years have I served Christ, and He has never done me wrong; how then, can I curse him, My King and My Savior?" In vain, he was threatened with being thrown to the wild beast and burned alive. When the proconsul said to Polycarp, *"I have wild beasts, I will expose you to them unless you repent."* *"Call them,"* the man of God replied, *"our minds are not to be changed from the better to the worse."* Then the proconsul said, *"I will tame your spirit with fire since you despise the wild beasts."* Polycarp answered, *"You threaten me with fire which burns for a moment and will soon be extinct; but you are ignorant of the future judgment and that fire that is reserved for the ungodly. But why tarriest thou? Bring forth what thou wilt!"*

What could have given Polycarp and other martyrs such courage to stand in the face of opposition, and even death, and remain faithful? The answer that we find here is the same that will aid us to stand firm in the days in which we live.

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