



Sunday, October 1, 2023
Revelation 2:8-11

Well, good morning church and welcome to our next instalment in our series on the book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ. Last week we started walking through the seven messages that Jesus spoke directly to the seven churches in Asia minor. The first church was Ephesus and we were reminded that as a church and as Christians, our good works must continually flow from a heart of love for Christ; that it can look like we have everything perfectly together on the outside, but if we've lost our first love in Jesus Christ, then we really have nothing. Everything we do for Jesus should flow out of the foundation of the love that we have for Him. And so we see this exemplified in the imagery of Jesus amidst the lampstands from the original vision. The light of the churches, is the love of Christ, and the only way the church can show the love of Christ is if it is connected to the source which is Christ himself. We draw deep from his well to keep our flame alive. Now, as we step into the second message today, this one is very different. The church in Smyrna was an entirely different congregation, and so the message to them was again, very specific to who they were.

Revelation 2:8-11 (NKJV)

"And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write,

'These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life: 9 "I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. 11 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death."

The message to the church in Smyrna is all about enduring suffering. Not suffering for the sake of suffering though. As we will soon see, suffering for the sake of the Gospel. And in many ways, I find that this message should resonate well with us as a church, seeing that we just finished walking through the book of 1 Peter which was essentially based on a similar concept. But before we get into the nitty-gritty, the first thing that we should note is a reminder from last week's opening line, 'These things says He...' We learned last week that this is the Greek phrase, 'Tade Legei.' This phrase is significant because although it is an authoritative statement meaning, 'Listen Up,' depending on which group of people it was spoken to, that would determine who the authority behind the statement was. For example, the Christians that heard this statement would have immediately recognized that this was an instruction from God Almighty because it was the same language used in the Old Testament when God spoke. But to the other citizens of the land, they would have recognized this statement from when an Emperor or Governor or even Caesar himself would have given a decree. So by using this specific statement, Jesus was making it clear that He was calling to attention all people - both Christians and non-Christians alike - to hear what He was about to say. And in the same fashion, the Greek word for church - Ekklesia - was also a word that was used for a group of citizens discussing civic duties as well as a word for Christians that would gather to pray, worship and read the Word.

It's not really that complicated when you think about it. We actually have examples of words that are used in Christian communication that also exist in secular communication as well. For example, one of the terms used for someone like me that pastors a church is the term, 'Minister.' And if you were sitting in a church context, and somebody introduced the minister to come up and share the word, then you would have full expectation, that a pastor such as myself, would take the podium. However, if you were to move that context into the House of Commons in Ottawa where the parliamentary sessions take place and invite the minister to come up and take the podium, you would see a very different person. You might see the minister of Finance come and talk about all things financial. You might see the minister of Health come up and share about healthcare and hospitals or you might even see the Minister of Transportation come and talk about the latest LRT project....etc. You see, the term minister simply means: 'an individual appointed or recognized to serve and lead in specific functions.' It's the same word with the same inherent meaning but equally as appropriate given the context in which each is used.

And so, by using language, like this, Jesus was making a bold statement that these words are for everyone, hence, the phrase at the end of each message, whoever has an ear to hear...

I open with this specific recap, because I'm not sure if you noticed it or not, but in the opening of

the message to Smyrna, the phraseology is just a little bit different from what we read last week and from what we will read in the coming weeks to follow. Did you catch it? He doesn't open up with the phrase, These things says He....like he did with Ephesus. Rather, He opens up by saying, These things says the First and Last, who was dead, and came to life. Which is not something to skip over.

The delineation of Jesus as the First and Last here is significant because it speaks to His eternal nature. By saying this, Jesus is telling the disciples in Smyrna, that our lives are bracketed - not by the decisions and actions of Caesar, not by the rise and fall of Rome, nor by the rise and fall of any governmental structure. Our lives are bracketed and controlled by Him and Him alone. So whatever else happens in our story Jesus is there as the first word and Jesus will be there as the last word. Now, the temptation when we hear this, is to segment the role of Jesus as only the beginning and only the end. However, the significance of Jesus being the beginning and the end is that the only way you can get from the beginning to the end is to pass through the middle. The middle is the point here. Jesus is with us in the middle. And because we know He has the first word and the last word then we can have great hope, and faith and peace, as we journey through the middle, knowing that He is with us every single step of the way.

Now, the 'first and last' comment is not new information but fairly common language and we see it frequently throughout the Scriptures. It is often used in conjunction with statements such as the Beginning and the End or even the Alpha and Omega - which all speak to the eternal dominion of Jesus Christ as the Source. But here, the identifier of Jesus as First and Last is not followed up by any of the traditional comments. Rather, now we see a specific statement: 'who was dead, and came to life' take their place. This also speaks to the eternal nature of God as the Source because death could not hold Him. But there's something else going on here with this opening line and by saying this, Jesus was actually sending a specific message that would speak directly now to the soul of the citizens of Smyrna.

Of the seven cities represented by the seven churches, historically, Smyrna was the most beautiful one. It was known as the 'Flower of Asia' and its beauty was well-known all across that area. As beautiful as it was though, historically, it was actually Ephesus that was well-regarded as the most prominent city in that region during the first century. Smyrna however, saw things differently and wouldn't accept that. In fact, all of their currency was stamped with the words "first city of Asia, in size and beauty." First. That city loved the word first. Not only that, but Smyrna had also gone through a significant once-dead-but-come-back-to-life experience. In 580 BC it was completely destroyed but slowly, stone by stone, it was rebuilt by 290 BC and the city of Smyrna was incredibly proud of its very own resurrection story. In Smyrna's mind, it was the first and would be the last

because it had defeated death. And so by choosing His opening words very carefully, Jesus was reminding dear Smyrna that it indeed was not first. But that He alone was the first AND the last. That they might have had some victories, but they did not defeat death. Only He has the power over death and life. The church in Smyrna would have already understood this message and was living accordingly, but Jesus now wanted every citizen to hear this as well.

And so from this point forward, we see Jesus speak to the church and affirm them in a great way unlike any of the other messages to any of the other churches, the church in Smyrna does not receive correction from the Lord. There is no, 'This I have against you'...no call to repentance...no correction...no warning. This tells us that this is a church that is operating as it should in the eyes of Christ that sees everything. This tells me that they are a people who have not lost their first love.

Yet in the middle of their obedience and effectiveness, there IS tribulation...

They were doing everything right; loving Jesus; faithful to Him; they were sold out for the Kingdom of God and yet they were experiencing tribulation. Which might not make a whole lot of sense when you think about it, but remember that it is Jesus who used the specific word tribulation here not them. It's His word and He has specific intention when using it.

The specific word for the tribulation that they were experiencing here is the Greek word 'thlipsis' which means, 'great pressure.' And in the world of science, we know that, 'pressure is the amount of force applied to a specific area. The greater the force, the greater the pressure.' As Christians, this kind of pressure can happen in one of two ways:

Sometimes we find ourselves under pressure because we are making careless, wrong or ungodly choices.

But sometimes we are under pressure because we are making wise, right and godly choices.

The disciples in Smyrna were experiencing pressure, not because of anything wrong that they had done, but because of everything right that they were doing.

Jesus knows the pressure that these Christians are under because of their love and obedience to Him and in His opening line to them says, 'I know your tribulation.'

I imagine this letter being read to the church in Smyrna and I think for many people, after hearing that line, and understanding that Jesus knows what they are going through, that there would automatically be this sense or assumption or even anticipation that the next words coming out of Jesus'

mouth would be something along the lines of, ‘...and I’m going to release you from it.’

But Jesus doesn’t do that does He? Jesus doesn’t say - I know your pressure and I’m here to rescue you from it. He says I know your pressure - because I’ve already walked that road - and I’m here to walk you through it, even until death.

What do you do with that? Like, what kind of pressure must this be that can lead potentially to death, even though they’ve done nothing wrong?

You see, this pressure - this thlipsis - isn’t released by God because this kind of pressure is a direct result of faithfulness. Thlipsis is the pressure experienced as the kingdom of God comes up against the kingdom of human beings in rebellion against God. It is the pressure experienced along the line where these two forces collide; It is the pressure experienced along the line, where the kingdom of light collides with the kingdom of darkness.

Look at it this way: when the light begins to shine in the darkness, the darkness has two options. One is to acknowledge what the light reveals and make the necessary changes. The other is to try and extinguish the light. The lampstand of the church at Smyrna was shining brightly. And the darkness of the city would not tolerate it. And so these lampstand Christians in Smyrna were feeling the pressure of the backlash of a society that did not want anything to do with faith in Jesus Christ.

And this pressure was incredibly real for them.

Jesus actually goes into great detail with two specific instances where they were experiencing this pressure. He talks about the pressure from those that were of the synagogue of Satan and then He talks about those that were being thrown into prison by the devil himself.

These are bold claims by Jesus and to understand their significance, we’ll need to delve a little deeper into the prevailing societal structure in Smyrna during the first century.

At that time, Smyrna was primarily under Roman rule, and as part of that governmental structure, the Jews were allowed to keep their religious system as long as it flew under the radar so to speak. However, as the Christians began to grow in number, they too experienced this same allowance because the Roman authorities simply viewed them as a sect of Judaism. The Jewish people hated this because they viewed Jesus as nothing more than a false prophet and did not want to be lumped in with Jesus followers. And so they started to conspire with the Romans and began to inform on the

Christians in an attempt to convince Rome to remove their freedoms from them as well. So when Jesus refers to these Christians in Smyrna as poor - this was a literal use of the term poverty, because as knowledge of their worship of Jesus, continued to grow, many businesses decided to have nothing to do with them for fear of Rome coming down hard on them as well. So many of these Christians were not able to buy, sell or trade and therefore had to trust the Lord for everything. So you can understand the strong language of Jesus towards these specific Jews because their actions were utter blasphemy towards Jesus. And by their persecution of the Christians, this specific group of unbelieving Jews had lost their right to be a synagogue of the Lord and as Jesus blatantly puts it, had become a synagogue of Satan instead - a gathering of people who were actually following the devil's priorities.

The devil's priorities have always been to defeat Jesus but since he himself has already been defeated, he tends to direct much of his attention on those that follow him instead. He figures that if he can take out the Christians, then Jesus will have no-one to rule. It's a weak argument but it's all he really has. And so again we hear the echo of Jesus' words that He knows their pressure but it's not over yet. That there is coming a time where they will face even more. Some of them will be subject to a ten-day period of suffering, some will be imprisoned and some will even face death.

And Jesus knows their faithfulness. He knows their love for Him. And He knows their suffering. And instead of releasing them from this crushing pressure, He cheers them on. He stands in the midst of the churches and says drink deep for there is still a race to run; there is still a battle to be fought.

Two things He does say are:

Do not fear

Be faithful

Do not fear, be faithful.

But this is a paradox. Think about it. Fear and faith are opposites. Fear comes from a lack of faith but faith overcomes fear.

And so, I guess the real question is that since a strong faith means a weak fear, then how do we keep our faith stronger than our fear in the midst of the pressure that is mounting.

And, I think that this is a very appropriate question for our generation as well. Because there are a

lot of fearful Christians out there. I have heard comment after comment after comment about how afraid people are of the end times. How afraid people are of reading the book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ. How afraid people are if they have to endure a little pressure because of faithfulness to Jesus. How afraid people are, when they see certain signs around the world that could mean the end is closer than we think. Friends these are certainly fearful events but make no mistake. These should not cause fear for the Christian - for those that are in Christ, Jesus. He, Himself makes it clear that the fear should be experienced by those who are not yet in Christ, Jesus.

I have a crazy friend of mine, who is so into this stuff. It's crazy. This guy will read every news article, interpret every governmental strategy in an attempt to look for examples that suggest the coming of the end times is sooner rather than later. And when he finds some thing, he gets so excited. He calls me up and he's like Josh, I found this crazy thing over here. Oh, I just get so excited because this could mean that the end is near. This man might be a little eccentric, but he's not operating in fear. He genuinely loves Jesus and he has great faith. And where there is great faith, fear cannot abound.

It's a call to strengthen faith, so how do we do that?

Spiritual disciplines. I cannot stress this enough. Did you know that every single one of the disciples of Jesus, except for Judas, died because of their faith? They did it willingly and unreservedly, because they knew Jesus, they had relationship with Jesus, they were disciples. I'll keep saying this until I die. In this generation we have the blessing of the Bible - read it. Pray every day. Live lives of worship - not just on Sunday, but the whole week long. Do not lose your first love or being faithful in times of testing will be nearly impossible.

Understand that these are times of testing. In verse 10. It says that the devil will throw some of you in prison that you might be tested. It's important to understand here that although the devil might throw some of them into prison, it isn't to test them. The devil isn't interested in testing you. He is interested in stopping and immobilizing you. And what the devil intends to be destructive, Jesus will often use as a test. The word 'test' here is the Greek word 'peirazō' which means 'to try whether a thing can be done.' Watch this: So God views our response to this pressure in many ways as opportunities for us to grow. He knows that there will be times where we don't always hit the mark, but His grace is there. These tests are not necessarily to see how perfect we are, but to see how much we can improve on and grow our trust in Him. And so the only way to grow faith is to test faith. There is a reward for faithfulness - the crown of life. Which is specific language for Smyrna, as they were well known in ancient Asia for hosting athletic competitions - particularly races. Those who won were granted a laurel wreath that would be placed on their head as a crown. In God's economy,

there is no one winner. All who simply finish the race are granted the most coveted of crowns: The crown of life. This fact alone should restore hope. And with this crown, Jesus promises that we are spared from the second death. The first death, we all die. The second death is the final death, eternal expulsion from the presence of God. Jesus does not promise immunity from the first. But the greatest news is that He does promise immunity from the second. We are all going to die the first death. So the real issue is ultimately the second.

I came across a great quote that helps to sum this up:

‘Those who are born once, die twice. Those who are born twice, die once.’

Friends - we are living in a moment of history where our world is literally changing rapidly. And if I can be completely honest, I don't what The Church will look like in the future. But I do know that as Christians we need to be prepared. I know that we need to fall deeper and deeper in love with Jesus. I know that Discernment and Wisdom need to be the things we are continually praying for. I know that we need to be in His presence daily. I know that we need to recognize the leading of Jesus and to have the courage to make steps of obedience accordingly. Not for our physical comfort - but for our spiritual inheritance!

And listen - I know that this is a lot to take in and for some of you might even seem overwhelming. It's important that we look at this through the lens of today. You see, every day prepares us for the next. So it's not that we need to look at the end of the world with the pressure to perform today. The focus should be on learning the tests that God has given you today because they will prepare you for tomorrow. It's the same thing with kids I think. I remember when Jordan and I first married and started talking about kids and we both looked at teenagers and we're like how in the heck are we going to do that. Well, you start off by having a baby and that baby grows, and as that baby grows, so do you. You grow into it.

So, Listen up! Says He who is the First and Last, the One who was dead but is now alive! And alive forever more! So do not be afraid. Be faithful to the One who is faithful to you!

Josh Hageman

Lead Pastor

Kingsview Community Church

Stoney Creek, ON

www.kingsviewchurch.com

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