

EFC

March 3, 2024

“Faithful to the Faithful One”

Revelation 2:8-11

Good morning, EFC. My name is Jeremy, and I’m one of the Pastors here by God’s grace. This morning continue our series in the book of Revelation, as we look at the second letter Jesus sends to the seven churches. Last week we heard Jesus challenge us to be committed to the truth, as well as be people who love God and our neighbor as ourselves.

This morning we will consider Jesus’ words to the church of Smyrna, and what they mean for us as EFC.

Pray.

Polycarp

- This past month marked the 1868th (or so) anniversary of the martyrdom of our Christian brother named Polycarp
- Disciple of the Apostle John, eventually became bishop of the church in Smyrna
- Smyrna – strong imperial cult, strong opposition from the Jews who turned Christians over to the Roman authorities
- When Polycarp was turned over to the Romans, they pressured him to declare “Ceasar is Lord” and offer incense to him as a god
- When he refused, he was brought to the Arena for execution. As he entered, he heard a voice from heaven encouraging him, “Be strong, Polycarp, and play the man.”
- One more time they tried to persuade him to deny Christ: “Swear the oath, and I will release thee; revile the Christ,” Polycarp said, ‘Fourscore and six years have I been His servant, and He hath done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?’” (Polycarp 9:1–3).
- A pyre was made, and the wood caught on fire but Polycarp was unharmed. Then a man stabbed him in the heart, and a great gush of blood came out and extinguished the remaining flames. After his death by stabbing, his body was burned.

Thus, the bishop of Smyrna died around 65 years after Jesus sent this letter to the church in Smyrna:

"And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: 'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.'" (Revelation 2:8-11)

[Slide: As Christians, we will suffer for following Christ.

The church in Smyrna suffered.

- Poverty

- Slander by those who should have worshipped Jesus, but instead denounced His followers
- More tribulation coming:
 - o Prison (awaiting trial and possibly death)

As Christians in the 21st century, I'm afraid we have (consciously or sub-consciously) believed the lie that if we are walking rightly with God, we should be comfortable and without trials or troubles or tribulations. But this is a lie, meant to undermine our faith and prevent us from boldly following Jesus and proclaiming the Gospel.

- This church was faithful to Jesus (nothing corrective said to them by Jesus)
- Jesus said, "A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.... They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God." (John 15:20 and 16:2)
- Jesus proves to us by His own suffering that walking rightly with God does not shield us from suffering, for He walked perfectly with God, yet He suffered more than anyone, as He was tortured and died on the cross, bearing the weight and punishment of our sins.

Being a Christian does not shield us from trials and persecutions; suffering for the name of Christ is normal in the Christian life, and it does not mean something is wrong between you and God!

The believers in Smyrna faced literal death for their faith in Christ and confession of the Gospel. We may not face physical death as we follow Jesus (though some of you in our church family have already fled situations where that was getting close, and we may all face such realities before we die). But we face death in other ways as we follow Jesus:

- Death of our financial well-being (like the believers in Smyrna) – loss of job, loss of promotion, loss of business because we won't lie, bribe, cheat, etc.
 - o Ex. – businessman here in EC among the rampant corruption
- Death of family relationships – you may be the first or only Christian in your family, and they may mistreat and ostracize you for it, and I know here in EC that feels like death!
- Death of friendships when we speak of Christ, or don't join in sinful living with them

"Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted...." (2 Timothy 3:12)

Jesus knows their suffering, and more is coming. So Jesus gives His church the encouragement they need to face such tribulation and remain faithful all they way until it is over. We need to hear the same encouragement.

[Slide: Suffering Christians need to know that Jesus still reigns sovereignly for good over EVERYTHING, even our suffering.

- First and last: already talked about in Revelation 1 that this reminds us God reigns today, as He has over all history, and as He will for all eternity
- Who died and came to life: Not even death, our greatest enemy, interferes with Christ's sovereign care of His people
 - o By the way, this is past tense: finished in His earthly life, death on the cross, and resurrection!
- Ten days: Jesus sovereignly es revealed in the duration of our suffering

- He has the final say: crown of life, eternity with Him

Suffering Christians need to know that Jesus knows what we are going through, and is with us through it all.

- “I know your tribulation...”
- Makes me think of Exodus from our Bible reading plan: God knows the suffering of His people, and He is not far off
- He Himself has passed through tribulation and death already

Even though His ways are not our ways, and are mysterious to us; we can know He is good!

As we follow Jesus as His redeemed people and His witnesses in this world, we will suffer tribulation of various kinds. We need to know that nothing is outside of His sovereign control, and we need to know He is with us with our ultimate good and God’s ultimate glory as His purpose.

And so, what sort of response does knowing Christ reigns require of us? Two things:

[Slide: We must not fear the suffering we will face; rather, we must remain faithful even to death.

Because Jesus reigns, we must not allow fear to reign in our hearts.

- When fear reigns, it keeps us back from doing what we know we must do
 - o Illustration: fear of conflict
- Fear comes from: thinking things are out of control, don’t have a good outcome, will never come to an end, don’t have any purpose
- But Jesus alone has the final word; Jesus reigns supreme over even our suffering, and He is good in all He does – even in our suffering
 - o Psalm 84:11-12 For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favor and honor. No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly. O LORD of hosts, blessed is the one who trusts in you!
 - o As we read earlier, God is working eternal good in us through our suffering
- So do not fear, church, for Christ alone has the final Word, and He is faithful.

So instead of being controlled by fear of tribulation, we must remain faithful even to death.

- Faithful to the One who is perfectly faithful
 - o Pistos: -
 - 1 Corinthians 1:9 God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.
 - 1 Thessalonians 5:24 He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.
- Faithful to see beyond this life, and value what is truly valuable – we are rich, even if “poor”; though we “die” for Christ here, the final outcome is eternal life with Him
 - o 2 Corinthians 4:17-18 “For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”
- Faithful by ongoing commitment to Him and ongoing living for Him and ongoing proclamation of Him, though doing so causes more tribulation.
 - o Remember Polycarp: ‘Fourscore and six years have I been His servant, and He hath done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?’

So be faithful even unto death, church. This was not theoretical for Smyrna, nor for Polycarp, and it is not theoretical for us. Jesus is calling us to actually follow Him, enduring whatever suffering He sovereignly and purposefully permits as we do.

You will not regret such devotion to Christ. He reigns, and He has the final word, and that final word is good. Jesus has great reward and vindication for us if we remain faithful with Him even unto death in this life. The victor's crown, and eternal life with Him.

“Be faithful unto 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. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.” (Revelation 2:10-11)