

Revelation 2:8-11 (Pew Bible, pg.1034)

Title: “No Fear”

INTRODUCTION

I feel the tide of revival is rising and coming in. I see it in the spirit of our worship these days. I see it in a growing urgency of many of you to pray, some at our three prayer times on Tuesdays, some in other groups that have spontaneously begun to meet. I see it in Sunday School classes who are studying what it means to have a fresh encounter with God. I see it in A2C groups where believers are experiencing a depth of Christ-centered relationships that they had not known before. I see it in changed lives, and testimonies that I hear from people, some from emails, some from personal conversations with people who have encountered Christ in a powerful new way in their lives. One of those whose life has been touched is Johnnie Pigg. I want him to come and briefly tell you what Christ is doing in his life.

TESTIMONY BY JOHNNIE PIGG

Open your Bibles to Revelation 2:8-11 (PB pg.1034). Typically when we study the Revelation we focus on future events, and that is certainly an important part of the message of Revelation. However the Revelation is initially addressed to seven churches located in the Roman province of Asia. In fact, Jesus specifically speaks to these seven churches in seven letters that are found in Revelation 2-3. We looked at the first letter last week, the letter to the church at Ephesus. The second letter is addressed to yet another church. **READ REVELATION 2:8-11.**

These letters are written to ancient churches, but they are written to our church. They were addressed to ancient believers, but they are addressed to you and to me. Each letter concludes with the statement of Jesus, “Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

In these days of revival in our church we need to hear what Jesus is saying to us. I think that often we are more concerned with what the world thinks about us than we are what Jesus thinks about us.

Each letter from Jesus contains a challenge to, first, **LOOK UPWARD**. In each letter there is a description, a vision, of the glorious and awesome Savior Jesus, who holds in His hand the destiny of each church. Second, we are challenged to **LOOK INWARD**. The all-knowing gaze of Jesus sees exactly what is going on in each church, and in each church member. Third, we are challenged in each letter to **LOOK FORWARD**. Each letter contains promises for the future that the church is to lay hold of as we strive to be radically faithful to Christ, no matter what the cost.

1. LOOK UPWARD

Revelation 2:8 - “To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.

Revelation reveals Christ in the fullness of His glory ... not just the incarnate Son in a manger, not just the crucified Savior on the Cross, not just the glorious Victor at the resurrection, but all these,

plus His majestic Kingship reigning over all. It's all here in Revelation. And in this case Jesus reveals Himself as the one who is...

“THE FIRST AND THE LAST”

Let me show you what this means: Jesus has complete and total control over all of history. He's the One who is at the first. Interestingly, perhaps the best explanation of this comes from something this same Apostle John wrote in the Gospel of John.

John 1:1-3 - In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

So as the First, He is the source and the beginning of all things. It all started with Him. But He is also the Last. He's the starting pitcher and He's the closer. He is the One who started everything, and He's the One toward whom everything in history is moving. All of history is moving toward a day when every eye will see Him, every knee will bow to Him, and every tongue will confess of Him that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Furthermore, Jesus reveals Himself as the one “who died and came to life again.” He suffered the awful agony of the crucifixion when the authorities nailed Him to the Cross. And the agony of His death was more than just the physical agony of suffering and having life slip out of His body. The Father, in that moment, was heaping on Jesus all the sins of all the world. Jesus experienced unimaginable despair as the One who bore our sins in His body.

But having gone through that awful, unimaginable ordeal of dying on the Cross ... He came to life again. He came to life again. Talk about a comeback. The resurrection of Jesus Christ was a miracle comeback from what appeared to be an overwhelming defeat.

Now, I'll show you in just a minute why it was so important for the believers in Smyrna to know this about Jesus.

2. LOOK INWARD

To understand what's going on inside this church, you need to understand what's going on outside the church.

Smyrna was the location of a famous temple dedicated to the worship of Roman emperor Tiberius. So life in Smyrna revolved around the worship of the emperor. Citizens were expected to stop by the temple every day and sprinkle a little incense to be burned in front of the emperor's statue. The authorities didn't much care what else you did, but don't be caught disrespecting the emperor. Come sprinkle some incense, say “Caesar is Lord,” and you're good to go.

Well as you can imagine this created a problem for the Christ-followers in Smyrna. For them there was only one Lord, the Lord Jesus Christ. For them there was only One who was worthy of worship,

the Lord Jesus Christ. So when they refused to participate in emperor worship, it got them into hot water.

And add to this hostility from the Jews who lived in the city. There was a very vocal Jewish community in Smyrna and they hated followers of Jesus. In v.9 Jesus calls them a “synagogue of Satan.”

So you put all this together and here’s what life was like for Christ-followers in Smyrna:

“AFFLICTIONS” AND “POVERTY” (v.9)

Revelation 2:9 - I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich!

The word for “afflictions” paints the picture of a crushing blow, like a huge rock falling on something and crushing it. That’s what these believers were enduring for faithfulness to Christ.

And then there was poverty ... extreme poverty. For the most part Christ-followers were poor people in a rich city. Why? As a result of their radical faithfulness to Christ they were probably excluded from the trade guilds in Smyrna and struggled to get jobs. They may have even had their houses and belongings confiscated because they refused to worship the emperor.

And Jesus says...

Revelation 2:9 - I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich!

But there’s more:

“SLANDER” (v.9)

Revelation 2:9b - I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

They were ridiculed, lied about, insulted, verbally abused and accused: “You put your trust in a crucified carpenter? Ha!” But there’s more:

“PRISON”

Revelation 2:10b - I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution...

Because they obeyed God rather than human authorities, they suffered the consequences by being thrown into prison for being radically faithful to Jesus. But there’s more:

“DEATH”

Revelation 2:10c - Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Jesus said, “Be radically faithful to me when you can’t get a job because of Me ... Be radically faithful when they slander you because of Me ... Be radically faithful when they throw you into prison because of Me ... Be radically faithful when faithfulness takes you all the way to execution for Me.”

HUGE QUESTION: Does the Christian life still work when there isn’t religious freedom, and economic advantage, and social acceptability? Does it still work? Absolutely yes!

How would you and I handle an environment like this? I’m so thankful for the protections our Constitution affords us. But what if the day comes in the US when we have no public officials who are sympathetic to churches like ours? What if the day comes when the church is forced to pay taxes, and your gifts to the church were no longer tax deductible? What if the day comes when authorities can just come in and confiscated our possessions and our homes and our buildings because we are believers? What if the day comes when your pastor is arrested because he preaches the truth of Scripture? What if the day comes when you face serious problems if you let anyone know you follow Christ?

Some might say, “Well we better just knuckle down and make sure that never happens in our nation. We better make sure we get the right people elected. Let’s put on a good PR campaign so the city will like us.” Yes, you could look at it that way. But I think our Savior would say, “Grow your roots deep in Me, feed on My promises and strengthen your faith so that if that kind of thing happens to you, you will remain radically faithful to Me.”

The church that Jesus died for, the Bride of the Groom Jesus, should say, “Bring it on. You can ridicule us, you can take our stuff away, you can arrest us ... you can kill us ... it doesn’t matter. We’re radically faithful to our Lord.”

Look at those words of Jesus again:

Revelation 2:10 - Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer.

Let me show you how to live with no fear. Let me show you what sustained the believers in Smyrna in their trials, and what will sustain you and me in our trials. It doesn’t matter if they are trials that come from persecution, or trials that come from sickness, or unemployment, or a rebellious son or daughter, or whatever. What sustains us is this:

FIRST, THE KNOWLEDGE OF WHO JESUS IS

Revelation 2:8 - These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.

Remember, Jesus is the First and the Last. That means He sovereignly started everything and He sovereignly concludes everything. And He is sovereign over everything in between. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, you must know that nothing, absolutely nothing, comes into your life outside of

that sovereignty, not even suffering. He's the First and the Last and everything in between for us. There's nothing to fear.

Jesus died and came back to life ... the ultimate comeback. And no matter how you get knocked down and defeated, the Savior who owns your life is a winner. The One who overcame the greatest event of suffering ever experienced is living in you and in me. We have nothing to fear.

SECOND, THE KNOWLEDGE THAT HE KNOWS WHAT WE'RE GOING THROUGH

Revelation 2:9 - I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

I tell you, suffering can cripple us because in it we often feel alone. No one understands. No one knows. Suffering and affliction has a way of creating such deep despondency in our lives because we feel separated, alienated and alone. Jesus says, "I know ... I know."

And what sustains us is the knowledge that Jesus knows. He knows without you telling Him. He knows and understands.

THIRD, THE KNOWLEDGE THAT HE CONTROLS THE TIMING OF EVERYTHING

Revelation 2:10 - Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days.

Now scholars differ as to whether this is a literal ten days or a figurative ten days. In the end it really doesn't matter. The fact is that it doesn't go on forever. Jesus controls the timing of it. He knows exactly how long to leave you in the fire.

Note: God knows what you can take before you go into the darkness of suffering. God doesn't put you under a load and think, "Well I wonder how long he can endure this." No, God knows exactly how long is best.

God knows that perseverance is only built by prolonged exposure to pain. But God knows what is too long, and He won't take you there. Satan has one desire in suffering ... to destroy you. But guess what? Satan isn't in control. Jesus is. And Jesus is saying, "I know ... just a little bit longer."

FINALLY, THE KNOWLEDGE OF A CERTAIN REWARD

Revelation 2:10c - Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.

This is not the crown of a king, but the crown of a winner. One day in front of a vast heavenly throng He will reward you with the crown of life for remaining faithful to Him.

So look upward, look inward, then...

3. LOOK FORWARD

Revelation 2:11 – He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.

All true believers are overcomers. That's who you are, dear follower of Christ. And overcomers will not be hurt at all by the second death.

Now the first death is what will happen to all of us, unless Christ comes first. We will all experience physical death. But did you know that there is something the Bible calls the "second death." What is it? Friends, we're talking hell here. It's not that I don't deserve to be hurt by the second death; I genuinely do. Because we are sinners, there's nothing you or I deserve more than hell. The reason I will not be hurt by the second death is not that I don't deserve it, but because Jesus absorbed in His body the wrath of God that I otherwise would have to face in hell. And when I place my faith in Jesus Christ and take Him as my Savior and Lord, I don't have to fear the first death (whether it comes by persecution or by illness), because I will immediately go into the presence of Jesus. And I don't have to fear the second death because Jesus, in unbelievable mercy and grace, suffered that hurt in my place on the Cross. I have nothing to fear.

ILLUSTRATION - Let me show you how this message from Jesus actually sustained the believers in Smyrna. We actually know something about the pastor in Smyrna, a godly man by the name of Polycarp. Many years later Polycarp was brought before the angry citizens of Smyrna and was told to swear allegiance to Caesar and to deny Christ. The old pastor refused, saying, "Eighty and six years I have served him, and he never once wronged me; how then shall I blaspheme my King, Who has saved me?" Polycarp was warned that if didn't change his mind and renounce His Savior he would be burned alive. Polycarp said something like this: "I have no fear of this fire that is about to consume me. In a short time it will all be over. But for the one who has rejected Christ, the fire that burns in hell will never be extinguished." And with that Polycarp entered glory through the fires of persecution.