

WILL WE SURVIVE ADVERSITY?
Jesus' Concerns for His Church
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Our scripture today comes from Revelation 2:8-11. "To the angel of the church in Smyrna write, These are the words of him who is the first and the last, of him who died and came to life again. 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. 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. Be faithful even to the point of death and I will give you a crown of life. 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."

We're in a series on the seven letters of Jesus to the churches of Revelation that deals with Jesus' concerns for his church. Last week we looked at the first letter to Ephesus and dealt with the concern "Will our love grow cold?"

Today this second letter, to the church of ancient Smyrna – "Will we survive adversity?"

Smyrna was a town located about 35 miles north of Ephesus. It is in now western Turkey, then the Roman province of Asia. It was a rival city to Ephesus, boasting a population of 200,000 people. It like Ephesus claimed to be the first or lead city in the province of Asia. It was a city that had a rich history, having been a city that died for nearly four centuries and was brought back to life by Alexander the Great. One of the few planned cities of antiquity.

Today the ruins of Smyrna are contained within the modern Turkish town of a million people. They are not knee deep in the harvest today. There are only about 5 born again Christians in a city of a million.

This church was no doubt founded in Smyrna as a result of Paul's ministry in Ephesus. A young convert in that church at the time of the writing of Revelation was a man in his twenties by the name of Polycarp. Polycarp heard this word of the Lord that "the devil was going to throw you into prison for ten days." This is kind of a metaphor that describes short and intermittent. Indeed that's exactly what happened in the history of the Smyrna church for intermittently for short bursts of time over the next decade that church experienced great persecution. Polycarp went on to become a distinguished leader of the church, the pastor and bishop at Smyrna. At the age of 86 he was arrested, brought into the coliseum at Smyrna, tied to a stake where wood had been prepared to burn him to death. He was given the chance by the proconsul to repent of being a Christian. They asked him to say, "Away with the atheists!" In those days Christians were called atheists for they did not believe in the Roman gods. Polycarp, his contemporary writing of his death, instead looked up to heaven and with a wave at his hand to the audience, the people calling for his death, said, "Away with the atheists!" They asked him again to recant and turn on Christ and he utters these words that have been immortalized in church history, "Eighty and six years I have served him and he has done me no wrong. How can I then blaspheme my king who saved me?"

I think Polycarp's life is somewhat representative of what happens to the church at Smyrna. It also reflects the deep intensity of the Lord for a church he cares very much about that will undergo much suffering for him.

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We are dealing with the words that begin with C – there are four words today that begin with C.

First the Character of Christ.

Each of the letters to the seven churches begins with a description of some aspect of the Lord's character revealed in a vision in Revelation 1 that has special application to that particular church. The special application of the Lord that applies to Smyrna both to the community and to the church is that he is the first and the last. To a city that claimed to be first, Jesus says, "If you want to know whose first, who has priority, who has background in terms of origin, I am the first. I can make a claim that Smyrna cannot make. I am also the last. I am he who died and came back to life again." How appropriate to a city that died and came back to life again would be addressed by the Lord who died and came back to life. Cities may die and come back to life and nations even like Israel may seem to die and come back to life. But human beings don't die and come back to life. The last thing said about a human being is that they died and were buried. But of Jesus that is not the tagline. It is not that he died. But "he died and came to life."

So the church is reminded. And we are the church being reminded that we serve the risen Lord. That's his character – first and last, died and came to life.

Then there is Commendation that Jesus makes to the church – the second part of the letter. He says "I know your afflictions and your poverty and I know the slander against you." Let me put these in an easily rememberable form by suggesting that Jesus is telling the church, us, that he knows when we're under pressure. He knows when we're in poverty. He knows when we're getting put-downs for the sake of our faith in him.

First, I know your adversity – or pressure. I doubt that there are many of us in this auditorium today who don't know what pressure is all about. We face it continually. There is pressure that is part of being a human being and then there is pressure that comes as a result of our linkage with Jesus Christ. Being loyal to him.

The word for "pressure" or "affliction" in the Greek language is an important word in the New Testament being used 44 times as a noun and 10 times as a verb. It crops up in unexpected places. Like Matthew 7:14 where we say, "narrow is the way." Jesus says, "There is narrowness and constraint." It is to be pressed upon, squashed, hemmed in, afflicted and oppressed.

Jesus says in the world you will have pressure but take heart he has overcome the world. Pressure is part of living.

It's part for the Smyrnans and part for us in following Jesus Christ. That there is an easier way than following Jesus Christ. The New Testament is telling us there are painful traces we experience as Christians. Sometimes we are hemmed in and constrained for the sole reason that we are being loyal to Christ and not taking the easy way out of a problem.

We need Christ with us in the pressure moments. When we are going through pressure we can be trying to get out of God's hand or like a child clinging to God's neck.

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Here was the Smyrnan church clinging in the midst of pressure. The church at Smyrna knew what it was like to be pressured but they also knew what it was like for Christ to be with them. So we must also, whatever our pressure is know that Christ is with us.

Then “I know your poverty.” Pressure and poverty. Nothing worst than having poverty added to pressure. The church at Smyrna was poor. Yet interestingly enough Jesus calls this church rich. “I know that you are poor, yet you are rich.”

Then the Lord says to this church that he knows the put downs that they've been getting. The slander of those who say they are Jews but are not. A particular source of persecution for the Smyrnan Christians was coming out of the synagogue where at issue was the definition of a true Jew. Who is a true Jew? One who has the faith of Abraham, the apostles would say. But there was a persecuting force in that synagogue against the Christians. Unfortunately this text was taken by the medieval church and used as a grounds of conducting pogroms against Jewish people. It's regrettable that that ever happened because the early church, the biblical New Testament church was not a persecuting church. It was a persecuted church.

Whoever takes gun or club to force their religious faith or deprive someone else of their belief is not only showing the poverty of their own belief but is not acting in a way that God would approve. Here is a church that knows the cost their stand for Christ that it has made.

All my life is staked on the fact that a boy was born of the Virgin Mary at Bethlehem, that this child grew up in Nazareth, that he ministered in Galilee and died in Jerusalem and that he rose again from the dead. On him the whole fate of the world rests including my own. When faced with that belief there are some people who look down upon it and ridicule it. There are some who say that for a person to hold such a position would be to advocate a know-nothing attitude. There are places in the world where to hold such a belief is to lay one's life down to affirm it. It costs even in our culture and society to be a Christian. There are put downs we get. Like being narrow minded or bigoted.

We stand out because of our faith in Christ and there are some people not comfortable with that.

Jesus says to the Smyrnan Christians “I know.” There are two kinds of knowledge – a knowledge that's just by observation and a knowledge that's by experience. Jesus says I know, in the sense of “I know what it's like to be pressed. I know what it's like to be poor. I know what it's like to be put down. I know.”

For this church in Smyrna unlike the other churches there is no condemnation and therefore there is no correction so therefore there is a third thing given to it and that is counsel. Verse 10 “Do not be afraid of what you are going 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.”

What kind of counsel is this? The Lord says something that kind of goes against the grain of what we'd like to see him give people that are in pressure. Jesus is essentially telling this church things are going to get worse. “I know you're in pressure, I know you're in poverty, I know you're getting put downs but ahead of you is prison and persecution.” What Jesus does here to the church at Smyrna is he gives them – and this is such a vital point but I wish this weren't in the Bible. Jesus says to them, there will be no earthly solution for your problem. The only

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solution you can expect is a crown of life. The Greeks had two words for crown. One is the laurel wreath that was on the brow of the bride on her wedding day or on the brow of the victor in the race. You can look forward, he says, to the crown of life. We would prefer that the Lord get us out of all of our problems and not tell us this bit about delayed gratification.

I came across a story of a man who found the cocoon of an emperor butterfly and brought it into his home and watched it. One day there appeared to be a little breaking of the cocoon. He watched as the small opening began to get larger. For a few hours the butterfly struggled. Then it seemed it couldn't force its body past a certain point in the opening. So the man, deciding that something was wrong, he got a pair of scissors and snipped the cocoon. The butterfly then emerged easily. But its body was large and swollen and its wings small and shriveled. The man expected that within a few hours the wings would fan out to their natural beauty but they did not. Instead of developing into a creature free to fly the butterfly spent its life dragging around a swollen body and shriveled wings. The constricting cocoon and the struggle necessary to pass through the tiny opening were God's way of forcing fluid from the body into the wings. The merciful snip was in fact cruel. Sometimes the struggle is exactly what we need.

A.W. Tozer sums up the real Christian in these paradoxical terms. "A real Christian is an odd number anyway. He feels supreme love for one whom he has never seen. Talks familiarly every day to one he cannot see. Expects to go to heaven on the virtue of another. Empties himself in order to be full. Admits he is wrong so he can be declared right. Goes down in order to get up. Is strongest when he is weakest. Richest when he is poorest. Happiest when he feels the worst. He dies so he can live. Forsakes in order to have. Gives away so he can keep. Sees the invisible, hears the inaudible, knows what passes knowledge." Powerful description of a Christian life.

Counsel: You're going to be slapped into prison.

Then the fourth part and the last part addressed by the Lord to the Smyrnan church. It's the challenge. The challenge to hear and to conquer. The challenge to hear that there is always the possibility that we'll be listening to other voices. The Lord is saying turn the frequency of your dial on my voice and listen to me. When you're in pressure and poverty listen to me.

Then the challenge to conquer. We suggested last week that Revelation 12:11 tells us how to conquer – by the blood of the lamb and the word of our testimony is what Christ has done for us is the foundation point. Then we add our cheering to what he has done.

We're given as a promise if we conquer that we will not be hurt by the second death. There is not a promise that we will not be hurt by the first death. The scriptures know two kinds of death. The death which is earthly death and separation from family and friends. Then the second death which is separation from God. To the Smyrnan church Jesus holds out the assurance that there will not be a second death. They will not be hurt at all by it.

Jesus does not promise us immunity from the first death. He promises immunity from the second. Life is the most precious gift that can be given. Jesus says to the church and he says to us, I've come to give you eternal life. You can endure this present adversity because it's only temporary. Only now. Jesus is concerned for us as we face adversity in our life. He's asking us the question, Will you survive adversity? Even if I give you no promise that things are going to

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be ok quickly, even if I give you no promise that within your lifetime there will be a resolution to this. Even if the promise is *then* I will make all things clear. If the promise waits that long. Will you be faithful unto death? Will you survive adversity? It is a searching and a challenging word from Jesus to our lives.

Father, I pray especially in these moments for those among us who are facing great pressures. We would like to see you intervene in this life and thank you, Lord, for the many times you do. We would not abandon your promise that encourages us to say to this mountain, Be thou removed! And at the same time we're aware that in serving you we acknowledge you as sovereign Lord. There were some things in the early church you didn't remove but simply said, "Be faithful. Serve me. Trust me." We want to do that Lord with all of our heart. We want to trust you when the pressure is so great we feel we can hardly bear it. We know that you are with us. Great and wonderful promises are set before us. You do not leave us in life without hope or encouragement. You give us the most precious gift of all, the gift of life itself, life in you. We ask your blessing and your strength upon each one of us. We thank you that you're concerned about us in our adversity. We praise you for it. In Jesus' name. Amen.