

Smyrna: Faithfulness thru Persecution

Revelation 2:8-2:10

Introduction:

The church at Smyrna was pulled apart by pressure, poverty, and persecution.

It is noteworthy that the word of Christ to the church of Smyrna contains no word of rebuke.

The only other church that enjoys this is the church at Philadelphia.

We will see that the trials that faced the Smyrna church kept them from impurity or compromise with evil.

In this sermon we will see how Christ counsels them under these difficult circumstances.

We will also see how Christ encourages them to be fearless and faithful.

This message to the Smyrna is one of the central passages in the Bible that deals with suffering and persecution.

The faithful Christians at the ancient city of Smyrna knew persecution well...

Smyrna lay just 35 miles north of Ephesus on the west coast of Asia on the Aegean Sea.

Smyrna is the only place to receive a letter where there is a city today.

Much of what makes this sermon difficult to preach is that we as American Christians know so little of what it means to suffer for our faith.

We just cannot relate to it. We have it so good here... It may not always be that way, but right now, we have so much religious freedom that much of the world does not enjoy.

I can't predict this morning what the American church is going to face in the future, but I do believe that we will begin to face persecution – possibly intense persecution in the future.

So in light of that please listen with a spiritual ear for what the Holy Spirit wants to say to you.

As we turn now to Rev. 2:8-11, you will notice that the outlines to these letters to the seven churches are very similar to one another, so we must pay close attention to the details.

They are important...

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In our message this morning I want to stress Faithfulness on our part and God's faithfulness when believers are under persecution.

VIDEO CLIP

This week as I was preparing for this sermon I read this little conversation:

A visitor to a ranch said, "Say, look at that big bunch of buffaloes."

The ranch hand corrected the visitor, "Not 'bunch' – 'herd'.

The visitor replied: "Heard what?"

"Herd of buffaloes," said the ranch hand.

"Sure, I've heard of buffaloes, said the visitor, "There's a big bunch of 'em right over there."

One of the things we will learn in this series is the fact that God is faithful. He's faithful to His promises.

Friend, you can absolutely TRUST God in all things!

Psalm 100:5 says, ***"The Lord is good and His love endures forever; His faithfulness continues through all generations."***

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Every time we see a rainbow, we can remember that God is faithful - He keeps His promises. Every time we pick up a Bible, we can remember that He said, ***"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away"*** Matthew 24:35.

Every time we gather to worship with brothers and sisters in Christ, we can remember that He said, ***"Where 2 or 3 come together in my name, there am I with them"*** [Matthew 18:20].

Every time we face trials and temptations, we can remember that He said, ***"I will be with you always, even to the end of the world."*** (Matthew 28:20)

And when we stand on the brink of death, we can remember His promise, ***"In my Father's house are many rooms...I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me. For where I am, there you will be also"*** [John 14:2-4].

The songwriter was so right when he penned these words: ***"Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father...Morning by morning new mercies I see. All I have needed Thy hand hath provided. Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me."***

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So, there is no doubt that God is faithful. The question is: What effect will God's faithfulness have on us?

Because God is faithful, He calls us to be faithful just like Him.

And because God calls us to be faithful, we are guaranteed that he will enable us to be faithful.

But, just what does it mean to be faithful?

I. THE DEFINITION OF FAITHFULNESS

To begin with, let's define "faithfulness" so that we make sure that we're talking about the same thing.

If you were going to define faithfulness, as Paul uses it in the N.T., how would you define it?

Well, if you looked in the dictionary, you would find a technical definition that says, "**To follow through with a commitment regardless of difficulty.**" That's a pretty good definition.

Another dictionary definition says: "**Firm in belief, reliable; dependable; honest; loyal. Consistent in the performance of duties or service. Steady; not fickle.**"

One thing I want us to be very clear about is that being faithful does not mean being perfect.

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Even though aiming for perfection is a Scriptural goal and command (2 Cor. 13:11 which reads, **11 Finally, brothers, good-bye. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.**), it is not what God requires from us to be saved.

God knows us, and knows that we will not be perfect.

He's the one who declared that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:21).

So, our call to faithfulness is not a call to perfection.

Listen to some NT verses that contain our call to faithfulness:

1 Corinthians 4:2, **"Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful."**

In Romans 12:12, Paul admonishes us to **"be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer."**

Peter declares that **"each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms."** (1 Peter 4:10)

The book of Revelation contains several calls to faithfulness.

Revelation 14:12, ***“This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints who obey God’s commandments and remain faithful to Jesus.”***

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 10 days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.”***

From these verses we see more clearly that God is calling us to a faithfulness characterized by loyalty and reliability.

We must hang on, and be true to our commitment to Christ, even in the face of death.

If we do so, then we will receive our reward – the crown of life.

Not a royal crown, but the victor’s crown. A laurel wreath given to the winner of a race.

· Let’s take a look at the persecutions that the people in the church of Smyrna were facing, or about to face.

Notice what Jesus says about each of their hardships:

a. I know about the Pressure (v. 9a)

The Greek term translated tribulation is ***“thlipsis,”*** which means ***“pressure”*** in the literal sense.

It is used, for example, of a man who was tortured to death by being slowly crushed by a great boulder, or of juice being pressed out of grapes.

This wasn’t about minor set-backs and irritations.

This was crushing pressures put on the Christians, that we are so unfamiliar with.

Jesus could say, ***“I know about your pressure”*** because He had personally experienced the worst of all pressures.

His blood was pressed out of Him while He hung on a Roman cross.

He bore the weight of the world’s sin upon His shoulders while He gruesomely died in the extreme pain of crucifixion.

“Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way

they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matt 5:10-12)

· Jesus actually said: ***“Suffering Smyrna – blessed are you for walking in my footsteps”***

b. I know about the Poverty (v. 9b)

The Greek word (*ptocheian*) is the word for abject poverty.

They were not just poor (*penia*).

The people of this church had apparently been robbed of their material possessions in the process of their persecution.

The remarkable statement here is that Jesus says that though they were poor, they were actually rich!

“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.” (2 Cor 8:9)

· They were rich positionally in Christ (Eph. 1:3), which of course, was by grace.

· They were also rich in that God had counted them worthy to suffer for Him (1 Pet. 3:14-17; 1:6; 4:13-14).

· They were rich in their spiritual lives because they were living close to God by faith.

Jesus could say, ***“I know about your poverty,” because He had experienced the greatest of poverties. He left the splendor of heaven to come to earth as a common baby. He grew up as one of us, without any of the benefits of glory to aid Him.***

· Jesus: ***“Suffering Smyrna – blessed are you for walking in my footsteps”***

c. I know about the Profanity (v. 9c)

These were the religious Jews who claimed to be the seed of Abraham.

They were, but only physically.

Spiritually they were of Satan and under his power and control (John 8:33-34).

“33They answered him, “We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?”

34Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.”

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They are the same, in Paul's time and even today, were the most active enemies of the Christians.

Thus it has always been in the church; false religion has been most zealous in opposing that which is true.

Profaning the name of Jesus Christ and the Christian cause still continues incessantly in this country.

We can see it today all over the world.

I shared several examples at the beginning of this message.

Illustration: Promise Keepers Event

To come closer to home, listen to this example.

When I attended a Promise Keeper event in Indianapolis, there was a group of people who distributed leaflets to anyone who would take them as the men went into the Promise Keeper services. They read:

“Say ‘No’ to bigotry and hatred. Defend reproductive freedom and gay rights. A group of so-called religious right wing bigots are meeting to advance their anti-gay, anti-woman political agenda.”

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Some women in that crowd exposed themselves to the men as they walked into the Dome.

Folks, the opponents of Christianity are going to oppose us not by saying that we are wrong, but by saying that we are evil and dangerous...

...anti-Semitic,
anti-choice,
anti-woman,
anti-gay,
anti-intellectual,
anti-tolerance,
anti-diversity

And they will do this in direct proportion to how public we are about the claims of Christianity.

The Worship Design team asked the question on Wednesday – Why isn't the church today suffering any persecution for Jesus?

Here's some of the answers we concluded on and they will make us uncomfortable:

- First, we're not Christ-like enough
- Second, we're not the NT Church like we could be.
- Third, we've settled into a Comfort Zone because we're happy with the size of the church.
- Fourth, we aren't a threat to the Devil

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You see – Church this is what was happening in Smyrna almost 2000 years ago.

They were really like Christ.

They were the NT Church

The persecution they faced forced them out of any kind of comfort zone.

And believe me – the Devil attacked them unmercifully.

I believe this with everything in me - when Christianity goes really public in a pagan world instead of remaining in our safe, isolated, comfortable sanctuaries the opposition labels us not as mistaken, but as evil and dangerous. It's profanity!

They'll write all kinds of articles in the newspapers when we get dangerous.

There will be believers who will get uncomfortable with the leadership of the church and decide it's too much to be faithful to Jesus.

Jesus could say, ***“I know about their profanity,”*** because He experienced the blasphemy of men – and still does.

People across this globe continue to make light of Jesus or openly ridicule Him.

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· He was blasphemed as having worked miracles in the name of Satan.

· He experienced the twisted crown of thorns pushed onto His head.

· He was slapped, spit on, and beaten.

· He was ridiculed as though He were a clown by forcing Him to wear a purple robe.

· He was goaded by Roman soldiers to prophesy who struck Him in the face and plucked out His beard while blindfolded.

· He was mocked by chief priests to get off the cross if He were the Son of God.

· He was even insulted by the criminals condemned to die with Him.

· And you know what - People still treat Jesus this way today!...

· Jesus: ***“Suffering Smyrna – blessed are you for walking in my footsteps”***

When Christians go through difficult times, it is as if Jesus is says:

· If you never felt pain, then how would you know that I'm a Healer?

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- If you never went thru difficulties, how would you know that I'm a Deliverer?
- If you never had a trial, how could you call yourself an over comer?
- If you never felt sadness, how would you know that I'm a Comforter?
- If you never sinned, how would you know that I'm forgiving?
- If you knew all, how would you know that I will answer your questions?
- If you never had troubles, how would you know that I will come to your rescue?
- If you never were broken, then how would know that I can make you whole?
- If you never had a problem, how would you know that I can solve them?
- If you never had any suffering, then how would you know what I went through?
- If you never went through the fire, then how would you become pure?
- If I gave you all things, how would you appreciate them?

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- If I never corrected you, how would you know that I love you?
- If you had all power, then how would you learn to depend on me?
- If your life was perfect, then what would you need Me for?

You see the Bible doesn't promise that we will have an easy road in this world as a Christian. Instead, it's quite the opposite!

"... I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. "Remember the word that I said to you, "A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you..." (John 15:19-20)

II. THE DEVELOPMENT OF FAITHFULNESS

Finally, let's ask this critical question, **"How do we develop faithfulness in persecution and trials?"**

Let's answer that question with an illustration.

Does an apple tree stand out in the middle of an orchard saying, "Now how do I develop apples?"

No, an apple tree produces apples because that's what apple trees do.

Galatians 5:22 lists the fruit of the Spirit.

The fruit of the Spirit is the product of the Holy Spirit; the outcome of the Spirit; or that which the Spirit produces in us.

Guess what shows up in that list? You guessed it. In addition to **love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control is faithfulness.**

Therefore, I need to realize that faithfulness is not so much something that I'm striving to develop, but something that I want to allow the Holy Spirit to create in me.

When we are Spirit-led Christians, then we produce fruit because it's the natural thing to do.

We don't have to sit around and think about it and analyze it.

But we do have to be careful that our branch is never detached from the vine, and that we are not allowing some disease to destroy our fruitfulness.

Jesus talked about this when He said in John 15 verses 1 and 2

1 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. 2 He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.

So, how do we allow the Holy Spirit to develop fruitfulness and faithfulness in us?

Here are some things to be aware of.

1. First, we need to realize that temptations will come.
 - a. Just as surely as Jesus was tempted to be unfaithful, we will be tempted to be unfaithful - in our marriage, in our relationship with the Lord, and in the church.
 - b. That's what Satan does. He will tempt us to be unfaithful.
 - c. We need to recognize those temptations and allow God to help us stand up under them.
2. Second, we need to seek the Holy Spirit's reinforcement by developing regular, positive, spiritual habits.
 - a. This world we live in is not a Christian world. Our nation is not as much a Christian nation as it used to be.
 - b. We're being pressured on every side to develop negative habits, we are being tempted to be unfaithful in church

attendance, to be unfaithful in prayer, and in studying the Word of God.

c. We've all felt those temptations. We sense our time being stolen away.

d. We feel ourselves being distracted and drawn away to foolish and meaningless things.

e. But, like Jesus, we need to learn to say, **"Get thee behind me, Satan,"**

f. We must be determined to serve God faithfully, and then people will be able to count on us.

g. Then we will be consistent, and trustworthy, and reliable.

h. If we will develop these habits and walk in the Spirit, then some of this will come more naturally and automatically.

3. Finally, we need to get back up when we fall or are knocked down.

a. Simon Peter is one of my heroes in the scriptures, but not because he always did right.

b. Sometimes he made glaring mistakes, he even denied the Lord three times, and he wept bitterly because of what he had done.

c. But every time he fell down; he got back up again.

d. So, when it came time to choose someone to preach the very first gospel sermon on the Day of Pentecost, guess who was chosen?

e. The Holy Spirit said, **"Simon Peter, you do it."**

f. So, faithfulness doesn't always mean always doing it right, but it does mean staying at it and trying to get it right.

g. Isn't that a relief?

Conclusion:

I want you to know that I am working harder than ever to be close to Jesus and being faithful.

But it has to be a consistent/daily work for me, just like it is for you.

If I'm not careful I can become inconsistent in my own daily spiritual disciplines.

If I'm not careful I could fill my time with the enjoyable and unimportant rather than the necessary and difficult things.

If being faithful meant perfection, then we wouldn't have a chance.

But thanks be to God, His love and His grace covers my sin and my failures and assures us that

He wants to continue to work in you and me and work through us.

And if we allow His Spirit to work within us, then the fruit of faithfulness will be even more real and evident in our lives.

The more I yield to His guidance, the less vulnerable to discouragement and temptation I will become.

What are the results of Unfaithfulness?

In the Last Days, Jesus told us because of unfaithfulness there would be great falling away.

3 “Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, 4 who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God.” II Thess. 2:3-4

Folks, there are too many professing believers who are playing at church, unfaithful and not grounded in Christ Jesus, not being obedient to Christ who will be left behind when Jesus comes to Rapture His church.

Let me tell you what is happening in our world today for true believers who profess Christ Jesus.

- A prominent national leader in the unregistered Protestant house church movement in China was executed Oct. 14, 1999 by firing squad.

- In India, a 26-year-old Catholic nun was raped and mocked for her faith.

- A priest in Egypt was shot. A bishop faces from eight years in prison to the death penalty on charges resulting from his reporting that 1,200 members of his diocese had been tortured.

- In a largely Christian province of Sudan, 700 people die from starvation each day. 50,000 mostly Christian kids, have been sold into slavery for “the going rate” of \$50.

Pakistan – Many Pakistani Christians have been falsely accused of breaking the Law (blaspheming Mohammed)—a crime punishable by death. Some have even been killed by mobs after being acquitted of such charges. Despite hardships, Christians continue in love and perseverance, boldly sharing Christ.

China - China's "strike-hard" policy, presented as a crackdown on criminals, is hardest on Christians, putting more believers in prison or under detention than in any other country. China's house church movement, which comprises approximately 90 percent of China's Christians, endures unimaginable persecution, yet stands on its commitment to preach the gospel no matter the cost.

There will be people who thought they were believers who didn't listen with a spiritual ear Jesus pleading with them to be Faithful.

They will stand before Him on the Day of Judgment and He will say

Matthew 7:21-23

21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven. Only those who do what my Father in heaven wants will enter.

22 "Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord! Lord! Didn't we prophesy in your name? Didn't we drive out demons in your name? Didn't we do many miracles in your name?' 23 Then I will tell them clearly, 'I never knew you. Get away from me, you who do evil!'"

I'm wondering where we are today.

Are we going through a painful experience?

Do we feel that you've been knocked down, or maybe that you've fallen?

Have you been fickle and irresponsible in spiritual things?

Are you tempted to quit?

Keep pressing on believer friend. Hang in there, because God loves you and is faithful.

If you're here this morning, but are not a follower of Jesus, I want you to know that Jesus didn't quit. He was faithful. He went all the way to the cross and gave His life so that you and I might have the promise of everlasting life.

This wonderful offer of life is available to you.

This morning you can begin your journey with Him. He will never leave you or forsake you.

And when you're knocked down and you try to get up, you'll find His strong arm there to help you get back on your feet again.

If persecution – real persecution were to begin against us as a Church – How would we respond?

Would we be like Smyrna and be counted as Faithful?

If your heart is being tugged by God and you need to make a decision for salvation or for recommitment, then I encourage you to come forward and make that decision known. **Please do not delay any longer.**
Read verse 11 in closing invitation