

Ears To Hear
“Faithful Under Pressure”
Revelation 2:8-11
~ Delivered at DHBC on April 19, 2015

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Please open your Bibles to Revelation 2. Before we read our passage let me set the context.
 - The apostle John is in his mid 80’s. He is imprisoned for his faith on the island of Patmos. The risen Jesus appears to him and dictates seven letters that are to be sent to seven of Jesus’ churches on the mainland of what is now Turkey. **(SHOW SLIDE)** Here is a map. You can see Patmos and then the seven cities and their churches.
- Today we look at the letter to the church in the city of Smyrna. **READ 8-11.**
 - 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. 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. 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. Be faithful, even to the point of 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 will not be hurt at all by the second death.”*
- The ancient city of Smyrna is located in Modern Day Turkey. It is now called Izmir. In 2001 the National Security Council of Turkey began to regard Christians as a threat to national security, on par with Al Quaida.
 - Things escalated as media propaganda, political leaders, and columnists all tried to push Christians out of the country.
- Pastor Necati Ayden was from Izmir. On Wednesday, April 18, 2007, Pastor Necati kissed his wife and two children good bye and headed to his office. He and two other Christian men were to lead a Bible study with some young men who were interested in Christianity.
 - On the other side of town, ten young Muslim men made their final preparations to attend the Bible study. Many years later they told the court that they had to act because Christians were ruining their country. So that morning they got guns, bread knives, and ropes and arrived on time for the study.
 - Pastor Necati read a chapter of the Bible. When he finished, the assault began. The young men tied up Necati and his two Christian brothers. The assailants recorded everything on their cellphones as they brutally tortured the men for three hours and then slit their throats.
- The church in Izmir wrote a letter with the title, “A Letter to the Global Church from the Protestant Church of Smyrna.” I have included the entire thing in the bulletin for you to read later. Here is a section that describes Necati’s funeral.

- Despite the risk to their lives, “...*hundreds of Turkish Christians and workers came to show their love for Christ, and their honor for this man chosen to die for Christ...Boldly the believers took their stand at Necati’s funeral, facing the risks of being seen publicly and likewise becoming targets. As expected, the anti-terror police attended and videotaped everyone attending the funeral for their future use. The service took place outside at Buca Baptist church, and he was buried in a small Christian graveyard in the outskirts of Izmir.*”¹
- How did these Christians get such amazing courage? Courage to do Bible studies when they knew people were against them? Courage to attend a funeral that could get you killed?
 - We need to know because, even though we face very minimal opposition for being Christians, we are often embarrassed to even speak about Jesus. We can avoid being known as Christians because it might make us look bad.
 - So where can we get this kind of courage that stands strong under overwhelming pressure?
- We are going to see that these modern Christians in Smyrna got their courage in the same way that the ancient church in Smyrna did. They listened to Jesus’ words to churches. Through our passage today, Jesus wants to strengthen you with courage to stand strong under pressure.
 - To do this Jesus speaks of three things: first, how we are called into suffering, second, the temptation to cowardice in suffering, and finally, how to have courage in suffering.

CALLED INTO SUFFERING

- First then, let’s talk about how we are **(SHOW SLIDE)** called into suffering.
 - If you are going to gain this kind of courage it begins with having the right expectations. If you are taken into a room that is only moderately furnished and someone tells you it is a honeymoon suite you will say, “*This is depressing. I can’t handle this.*” But if your are told it is a jail cell you will say, “*this is actually pretty good.*” Expectations.
 - Likewise, if you think becoming a Christian means Jesus will solve all your troubles, heal all your sicknesses, and make you rich, you will fall apart when suffering comes. But if you expect that following Jesus will mean getting treated like Jesus, then opposition will not shock you. You’ll say, “*Well, I haven’t been crucified like my lord so things really aren’t that bad.*”
- What should the Christian expect? Jesus’ words to the church in Smyrna teach us that **(SHOW SLIDE)** anyone who wants to live for Jesus should expect opposition.
 - You can see clearly that the Smyrnan Christians were suffering for their faith. **READ 9** – “*I know your afflictions.*” The word here means “pressure” or “crushing pressure.”

¹ <http://www.whkwradio.com/spirituallife/11539258/> (accessed April 13, 2015).

- This is not anti-Semitic for who wrote this letter? John. What ethnicity was John? Jewish. The letter came through John but it actually came from Jesus. What ethnicity was Jesus? Jewish. This is not anti-Semitic. It is simply saying that those Jews who slandered were no longer worthy of the title “Synagogue of the Lord.” They were following another spirit.
 - So the Romans and some of the Jews in the city persecuted the Christians of Smyrna. They suffered because they basically said, ***“We believe, as the scriptures teach, that we are to submit ourselves to the governing authorities but the one thing that we will not do either publicly or privately is to give a man the worship that is due to God alone.”***
- For the church in Smyrna this meant suffering on four levels.
 - First, they were impoverished. Look at verse 9. **READ 9a** – ***“I know your afflictions and your poverty.”***
 - Since the Christians were shut out of the trade guilds and people would not do business with them they could hardly earn a living.
 - Second, they faced slander. **READ 9b** – ***“I know the slander...”*** On the playground we used to say, ***“sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me.”*** It’s not true. It hurts when people make untrue and unjust comments about you.
 - The early Christians were misrepresented and despised. They were said to be cannibals because they claimed to eat a meal consisting of the body and blood of Jesus. It was said they practiced incest because they called each other brother and sister, greeted each other with a kiss, and pledged to love one another. It was said they were atheists because they said the gods of Rome did not exist. Slander.
 - Third, they were imprisoned. Look at verse 10. **READ 10** – ***“I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison.”***
 - Finally, they were put to death. **READ 10** – ***“Be faithful, even to the point of death.”***
 - This sounds just like what happened in Kenya a few weeks ago when 150 Christian students were gunned down. It sounds like what happened in Syria a few months ago when 121 Christians were beheaded.
- Do you see how this all works? If you want to live for Christ it means following him and his values. These will inevitably clash with the values of the world and the result will be pressure and suffering for the Christian.
 - But you will notice that Jesus does not say he is going to take it away. It is part of the call. To be a Christian is to walk in the steps of our master.
 - Philippians 1:29, ***“For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him.”***
- We do not face anything like the early church but you know the pressure I am talking about. Many of you face this pressure in your families. In culture you can talk about spirituality all day long but to talk about Jesus is to shut down a conversation. You can believe what you want but just don't say Jesus is the only

way to God. Or think of the pressure facing Trinity Western University over their law school.

- These seven letters are meant to show us issues that every generation of Christians will face. In this letter we see that if you maintain your first love, if you maintain full allegiance to Jesus, you should expect pressure and opposition.
 - This is not to say the Christian life is not one of joy and hope but it is to get the right expectation for Jesus himself said, *“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: ‘No servant is greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also... I have told you this, so that when the time comes you will remember that I warned you.”*

COWARDICE IN SUFFERING

- Having talked about how we are called to suffering, we want to turn now to talk about the unique temptation that such pressure and suffering creates. It is the temptation to cowardice. So let’s talk about **(SHOW SLIDE)** cowardice in suffering.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE)** When the pressure for being a Christian increases fear tempts us to turn away from Jesus in order to alleviate the pressure. And it will work. If you never speak of Jesus and no one knows you are a Christian you will not face any pressure. But this is cowardice.
- The Smyrnan Christians were not cowards but notice that Jesus knows they will be tempted to this, particularly as their sufferings increase. That is why he says what he does in verse 10.
 - **READ 10** – *“Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer.”* Fear will tempt you to turn from full allegiance to Christ. This is why if you look at the end of verse 10 he calls them *“be faithful.”* Then at the end of verse 11 he calls them to be *“overcomers.”*
 - So fear leads to faithlessness. It was the pressure and fear that led Peter to deny Christ. But we are called to be faithful and overcome the pressure.
- This sounds so great but in real life it can be so hard. It is not fun to be looked down on. It does not feel good when people misunderstand you and call you “homophobic” or “bigoted.” It is hard in the university setting when the other intellectuals write you off as ignorant. It is hard when you are scorned as intolerant for believing Jesus is the only way to God.
 - That pressure can add up. When it does the temptation is to back off, to downplay your faith, hide your faith, or even to deny it. Pressure creates fear and fear leads to faithlessness.
 - So how do we get the courage to be faithful and to follow Christ no matter how strong the pressure gets? That is the answer we now turn to in our final section.

COURAGE IN SUFFERING

- We come finally now to talk about **(SHOW SLIDE)** courage in suffering.
 - The simple answer is this: look to Jesus. Look to Jesus. OK, but that sounds so cliché. What does it mean to look to Jesus? This passage shows us how.
- **(SHOW SLIDE)** First, look to Jesus when the pressure to be a Christian increases because Jesus is eternal.
 - From the very beginning of the letter Jesus is seeking to fill them with courage. He introduces himself with a title that fills them with courage.
 - Look at verse 8. **READ 8** – *“These are the words of him who is the First and the Last.”* This echoes the words of God himself in Isaiah. Isaiah 48:12 says, *“I am he; I am the first and I am the last.”*
 - What hope when we fear! Nations may come and go. People may arise to attack God’s people. But Jesus was there before people began and will be there forever. He is the first and the last. It is Jesus who will have the last word on our lives so we must not fear other people.
- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Second, look to Jesus when the pressure to be a Christian increases because Jesus is victorious over death.
 - Look at verse 8. **READ 8** – *“These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.”* It is the resurrection of Jesus that fills us with courage for since he died and rose again he will also raise all those who love him.
 - And notice how he ends the letter. **READ 11** - *“He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.”* The second death is eternal death for all those who do not love Jesus.
 - Rodney Stark wrote a book entitled *The Triumph of Christianity*. It is a historical overview of how this little movement of Jesus and his 12 friends literally took over the Roman Empire. One of the reasons was the courage of the martyrs. Stark writes, *“How could mere mortals remain defiant after begin skinned and covered in salt? How could anyone keep the faith while being slowly roasted on a spit?...Many pagans were amazed: the distinguished physician Galen wrote of Christians that ‘their contempt of death...is patent to us every day.’ Accounts of martyrdom make frequent mention of pagans having gained respect for the faith from having observed, or even having taken part in, the torture of martyrs. The pagan onlookers knew full well that they would not endure such tribulations for their religion. Why should so many Christians do so? Were they missing something about this strange new faith? This sort of unease and wonderment often paved the way for new conversions.”*²
 - Listen, if Jesus conquered death and one day he will raise all who believe in him to an eternity of joy, then nothing can ultimately defeat you. What is slander? Christ will commend you. What is

² Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity*, 152.

poverty? You are rich in Christ. What is death? Death will only give the Christian what they want most and that is to be with Jesus.

- When the resurrection goes down deep into your heart it makes you absolutely invincible for if death cannot even hurt you then there is nothing to fear.
- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Third, look to Jesus when the pressure to be a Christian increases because Jesus is all-knowing.
 - Look at verse 9. **READ 9 - *I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know the slander...*** When we are afraid we need someone who understands to be with us. Jesus knows. He walks among the lampstands. He walks among his churches. He is present. He knows.
- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Fourth, look to Jesus when the pressure to be a Christian increases because Jesus is sovereign.
 - No pressure or suffering can come to us except that Jesus permits it. This is so clear in verse 10. **READ 10 – *“Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer.”*** Why not? Because ***“I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days.”***
 - Now notice that although the devil will use the Romans to put the Christians in prison it is Jesus who is in control of the whole situation. They are not to be afraid because Jesus says it will happen. And Jesus puts a limit on it. Ten days is a symbolic way in the Bible of speaking of a short and limited period of time. So like God allowed Satan to attack Job but put limits on what he could do, so also the sovereign Lord will allow Satan to attack his people for a period of time. But do not mistake. It is Jesus who is sovereign.
- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Finally, look to Jesus when the pressure to be a Christian increases because Jesus is generous.
 - The letter ends with a tremendous promise that inspires courage. To the one who overcomes Jesus will give a gift – the crown of life.
 - Smyrna was famous for its arena and games. The wreath or crown was like our gold medal. Just as an athlete faces tremendous pressure and suffering, so believers will face this. But after the finish line there is a prize. Jesus will give you the crown of life.

THE BISHOP OF SMYRNA

- I told you of Pastor Necati from Smyrna. But there is a martyr from Smyrna far more famous than him. This man was likely in the church when John wrote. We do know that John himself appointed this man to be the pastor of the church in Smyrna. He was the bishop of Smyrna and his name was Polycarp.
- In A.D. 168 Polycarp was an 86-year-old man. He was captured and was required to sacrifice to the Emperor and name him as God. Like the other Christians Polycarp refused. He was led into the amphitheater amongst the roars of the crowd. He stood before the proconsul who had compassion on the old man and said, ***“Polycarp, deny Christ and swear that the Emperor is God.”***

- But this is what he said: ***“I have now served my Lord Jesus 86 years and he has done me no harm. How can I deny my King, who has saved my soul?”***
- The proconsul threatened, ***“I have wild beasts ready who will tear your body limb from limb if you do not curse Christ.” “Let them come for my purpose will not be changed.”*** The proconsul answered, ***“If the wild beasts do not scare you, I will have you burnt in the fire.”***
 - ***“You threaten me with a fire which will burn for an hour and then will go out, but you are ignorant of the fire of the future judgement of God reserved for the everlasting torment of the ungodly. But why do you delay? Bring on the beasts, or the fire, or whatever you choose; you shall not move me to deny Christ, my King, Lord, and Saviour.”***
 - And Polycarp took off his robe and laid down on the pile of wood where he was burned and eventually run through with a sword.³
- Friends, when you face pressure for being a Christian do not fear. Do not compromise. Do not turn away from Christ. For your life is in the hands of the eternal, risen, all knowing, sovereign, and generous Christ.
 - Fight the good fight. Be faithful. Look to Christ.

Keywords: persecution, faithfulness, fear, suffering.

³ Thielman J. van Braght, *Martyrs Mirror – The story of 15 centuries of Christian Martyrdom from the time of Christ to AD 1660*, 113.