

The First and the Last, Who Died and Came to Life Revelation 2:8-11

And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: 'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. 9 " '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. 10 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. 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.'

I have to say, after hearing Keith's message about returning to our first love 2 weeks ago, the fact that the letter to the church in Smyrna begins by Jesus telling them, "I know your tribulation and poverty and slander and that you are about to be thrown into prison," feels very heavy. I sometimes wonder, does the Bible truly talk this way as often as it seems, or am I seeing it where it is not sometimes? But after studying through this passage, it is obviously unavoidable. So I ask you to hunker down with me and feast upon the Word of God through a meal that may be a little bitter for all of us.

Jesus begins this letter by calling Himself the first and the last, who died and came to life. There's a reason for that which we are going to explore throughout the sermon this morning. Each letter in this series begins with a different description of Jesus, emphasizing an aspect of his person that brings encouragement to the different churches in different situations. And for the church in Smyrna, it is the fact that Jesus is the first and the last, the one who died and came to life.

It would be hard to find a description ascribing more sovereignty to Jesus than "the first and the last." It reminds us of a couple other descriptions of Jesus: **Colossians 1:17 – And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.** **Hebrews 1:3 – He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.** The absolute sovereignty of the universe. Not only did He, in the beginning, create all things by the word of His mouth, but all things are also currently held together by Him. At any point, if God did not will something to take place, He could simply stop holding that thing together and it would cease to exist. Every natural disaster, that brings with it death and destruction, is itself held up by the word of His power. Every entity who persecutes or battles against God's children is itself helped up by the word of his power, and if he were to withhold that word of power, would devolve back into a lack of existence.

Here, and only here, is the comfort and strength necessary to face persecution. God does not sin. Sin does not originate with Him. The very definition of sin is that which God would not do. By definition, His not ours, He cannot sin. Therefore, by sustaining all of the sinful entities by the word of His power, He is not sinning. By upholding a tsunami that will indiscriminately kill thousands of people, He is not sinning. Those things are not accidents. If we think that, we are misreading this text. BUT, He is working them for His purposes. They are putty in His hands. He is molding and shaping them to bring about that which He wants to bring about. Then add the fact that **he died and came to life** changes everything. Death is not the end. It's not final. This changes everything. It changes the tsunami and the overdose and the senseless death by DUI and the seemingly wasted life brought about by child trafficking. None of those things are final. None of them. Because He is the first and the last and the one who died and came to life. He alone is final. He initiated it and He will bring it to completion in perfect righteousness. If we know Him like that, we need fear any tribulation, poverty, slander, imprisonment, or death.

One of the men in the church of Smyrna, a leader in the church, likely the one who read this letter aloud to the church after John sent it, was a man named Polycarp. After contemplating the content of this letter, Polycarp was around when the promised persecution came. And he was sentenced to death. As an 86

year old man. If he would not recant his faith and reproach Christ, they would burn him at the stake. To this threat, Polycarp responded, "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour? ... You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour, and after a little is extinguished, but are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. But why do you tarry? Bring forth what you will."

It is not a weak faith that utters those words. It is a faith that is faithful unto death. And Jesus says explicitly in this letter, it is only the faith that is faithful unto death that will receive the crown of life. That is sobering. It should give us pause. It should push us to examine our faith. It should make us cling to one another as the body of Christ – to hold one another up in faith come what may.

3 simple, yet profound, points that Jesus is making to the church in Smyrna. A message directed at every church from the 1st century until now. **First, tribulation will come.** In v. 9 He says He knows their tribulation and poverty and slander. It is likely that these believers faced economic sanctions for not worshipping the emperor, a reality that we must understand we are not that far away from in this country. Let's not fall asleep and think we are immune from such poverty here. The slander they experienced likely comes from ethnic Jews who were not true Jews. Paul says in Romans that one is not a true Jew because he is circumcised, but because he has faith in Christ. It is likely Jesus is referring to those who are ethnically Jewish but not followers of Christ, therefore Jews who are not Jews. Long before this letter was written, Jerusalem had supported Julius Caesar in a civil war. As a thank you, the Jews were granted special permission to not worship the emperor. But that permission would not have extended to the Christians in Smyrna. They were no longer Jews in that way, and the Jews would not have accepted them in that way. The slander was likely the action of outing the Christians who were not worshipping the emperor.

The same thing goes on today around the world. In Communist China, "Christians" who meet in churches that have registered with the government will often "out" those Christians meeting in unregistered churches. It is tribulation and it comes at the hands of those who claim the name of Christ. And it is deeply discouraging. It tests our faith. It reveals the genuineness of our faith, whether it truly is a faith unto death.

And in v. 10 he says more is tribulation is coming. **The devil is about to throw some of you into prison.** This is the norm for the child of God. **2 Timothy 3:12 – Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.** I don't know how you read this, but it can certainly be read that persecution is required for you to be godly. NOT that our faithfulness to God will just lead to persecution in this life, although we can read it that way. NOT that this sinful world that hates God will ultimately persecute those who love him, although we can read it that way. BUT rather, in line with much of Scripture in saying, "The persecution is part of making you godly. It's necessary. You cannot be godly without it, so why wouldn't you desire it in some level."

I say it that way because suffering was necessary for Jesus to learn obedience. **Hebrews 5:8 – Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.** What does that mean?!?!?! Think of it like this. **We learn obedience in one of several ways. First, we learn it by coming to know and understand what our duty is, a duty that we originally did not know was ours. Jesus did not learn obedience like that. Second, we can learn obedience by being directed, guided, helped, or instructed on what we are to do. Again, Jesus did not learn obedience like that. However, a third way to learn obedience is to experience it in practice. In the sense that a person knows the taste of meat by eating it, it may be said of our Savior that he "tasted death" when he experienced death. One special kind of obedience is intended here, namely, a submission to great, hard, and terrible things, accompanied by patience and quiet endurance, and faith for deliverance from them. This Christ could have not experience of, except by suffering the things he had to pass through, exercising God's grace in them all. Thus, Christ learned obedience.**

Given that, I imagine the Christians in Smyrna learned obedience to a greater extent than you or I have. I imagine Polycarp's obedience had been taken to a level greater than yours or mine. Jesus is saying, I have tasted obedience through suffering. I know it intimately. I am aware of your suffering because I have tasted obedience through my own suffering.

And that begs a difficult question. Is the fact that Jesus, the first and the last, the one who died and came to life, knows their tribulation comforting? If he knows about their suffering and doesn't intervene, but actually lets them know more is coming, is that comforting? How do we read this? Because many would read it and say, "You're evil! You know about my suffering and stand idly by. And do nothing! I SAY that makes you evil." And to get around this, we play word games and attribute the suffering to other things. We try to remove God from it as if he somehow is not responsible. As if he is exempt.

Is God saying, "I see you. I'm watching you. I know what you're going through. I know it's terrible but I'm just standing idly by and not putting forth my hand for you"? Would that be comforting to you? *Would that not be like a father who had just received a diagnosis of his son from the doctor with a prescription in hand, walking into his son's hospital room and saying, "I see your tribulation and your suffering" and just sitting next to his son and never going to the pharmacy to fulfill the prescription?* Is that good? How could that be good?

It's good because Jesus knows by experience what it means to taste obedience through suffering. He knows, if the suffering was necessary for Him to taste obedience, it is infinitely more necessary for us to taste and learn obedience. So when Jesus stands by and says, "I know your tribulation and poverty and slander and imprisonment," we can be certain He is not helpless to stop it. We can be certain He is very intentional in not stopping it. He is using it to teach us obedience – and the joy that comes from obedience is greater than every ounce of momentary affliction we go through while he lovingly stands by and watches. Tribulation will come! All of it is TOTALLY under the watch care of Christ himself, and TOTALLY for his purpose.

The 2nd part of Jesus' message – **Don't fear, the tribulation will not last forever.** V. 10 is such a comfort. **For ten days you will have tribulation.** Is that 10 literal days? I don't know. Most likely not. But does it matter. In light of eternity, if it was 100 days, or 100 months, it would be light and momentary. Because it has an end date. It won't last forever. It's limited. And God will stop it when He knows it is righteous to stop it. **Isaiah 43:1-3 – But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. ²When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. ³For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.**

We don't think it should go like that. If he is the one who created and formed us, the first and the last, then he should not allow suffering and tribulation like that. We get the fear not, but not the part about the water and the fire and the flame. And Jesus is saying the same thing here. "Fear not" because you are going to face difficulty and I will protect you in it. Would we tell this to our children? Or, if we had the strength and sovereignty of God, would we not allow any evil to befall them? The extent to which we would not is the extent to which we are not righteous.

The righteousness presented in the Bible MUST sometimes allow evil to befall us. Please hear me, God does not sin. Sin does not originate with God. But righteousness, by definition, will sometimes respond to sin by allowing it to run its course and to use the opportunity to show the superiority of righteousness. If the most powerful man in the world was a righteous father, he would not always protect his children from

suffering and trial – to do so would be unrighteous. Your suffering is part of the plan. That’s why we aren’t to fear.

Luke 12:32 – Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. But how will he give it? Acts 14:22 – strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.

Tribulation will come. It must come. We will pass through the waters. We will walk through fire. But we are able to “not fear” because we know who is fully in control of it. He is the Lord our God. The Holy One of Israel. ALL suffering is momentary and light. That is such a hard sentence to say. But that is the Word of God, the essence of reality. We cannot soften it. Be it 10 days, 10 months, or 10 years, it is momentary and light. Don’t fear. He is working a weight of glory for you!!

And that brings us to the 3rd part of Jesus’ message. **If you are faithful, you will receive life.** V. 10-11. **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.** Notice the onus is on us here. If we are faithful, if we truly hear the word that is spoken, if we conquer. Salvation by grace alone includes a conditional call to be faithful. In other words, God saves unconditionally AND man is responsible for being faithful. Salvation by grace alone includes a conditional call to be faithful.

What is that specific condition? Death. Our passage today has a number of references to death. Jesus spoke of death over and over again. **John 12:25 – Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. John 11:25-26 – Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?** In order to live, you have to die. In fact, the phrase “be faithful and receive life” can be, in a biblically correct manner, translated as “die and receive life.”

The call to be faithful is a call to die. To be faithful is to die daily. If we aren’t faithful, OR if we don’t die daily, we will NOT receive the crown of life. We are faithful by dying. We conquer by being killed. ONLY those who die daily will not be hurt by the 2nd death. ONLY those who die the 1st death will not be hurt by the 2nd death. **Revelation 12:11 – And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.**

Notice, Jesus has no critique for the church in Smyrna. In fact, Smyrna is 1 of only 2 of the 7 churches that God does not correct in some way. He is not rebuking them. But they are deep into persecution. Not because they’ve done something wrong. But because that’s part of God’s plan. It’s for their good. Jesus is encouraging them, as a loving brother, to die – to be faithful unto death – to stand firm over and over again in the face of death, even to the point of death, because that’s the only way to receive the crown of life.

Interestingly, Jesus does not say, “Stand firm, be encouraged, because I have given you the crown of life.” No, in a very different way, he says, “Stand firm, be faithful even unto death, and I WILL give you the crown of life.” The condition still remains. Don’t be presumptive of your salvation. Do not say, “I made a decision in the past to follow Jesus and so He is giving me the crown of life.” Those are not the words of Jesus. Instead, He is saying, “You will prove that decision to follow Jesus by being faithful unto death.”

So, brothers and sisters, how are you doing dying daily? Are you growing in that obedience? Or is your fight to die daily the same as it was 5, 10, 20 years ago? Are you pushing yourself to die daily? Are you intentionally setting goals and working out your salvation, or is your sanctification gone to auto-pilot? Are you still battling to not watch those TV shows, not waste time on your phone, not wake up early to have your

devotional time, and not indulge in those sweets? You see what the gospel of cheap grace has done to us? We aren't dying! We are prone to think that the weight of our salvation stands upon the decision we made years ago to follow Christ, not upon our faithfulness in dying daily. But the bible clearly says, "If you aren't dying, you won't receive the crown of life." Those are not my words. There is biblical reason to think that be faithful and dying are one and the same. Dying is the only way to be faithful. Dying is the only way to repent, the only way to trust Him.