

SMYRNA: FEARING THE FUTURE?
Revelation 2:8-11
June 8, 2008 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

Josef Tson was fully prepared to die. It was late in the summer of 1977 and Romania was under communist rule when Tson, a Baptist minister, put all his worldly concerns in order after the manner of a dying man. Sustained by the courage of his wife, Tson prepared himself for certain martyrdom. He was to meet an officer from the secret police in the restaurant of a rather ordinary Romanian hotel. The communist officer had pledged to do what previous secret police officials had failed to do: silence Tson's ministry by offering him a secular job in exchange for a promise that he never again preach the Gospel. Turning down the job meant at least hard time in a prison camp and it might very well mean execution.

Tson met with the man and without flinching turned down the job, telling him, "Now I am ready to die. You said you were going to finish me as a preacher. I asked my God and he wants me to continue to be a preacher. Now I have to make one of you two angry and I decided [it is] better [to] make you angry than God. But I know you, sir; you cannot stand this kind of opposition and you will kill me in one way or another. But I accepted that and you should know that I have even put everything in order and made ready to die. But as long as I am free, I will preach the Gospel."

The communist officer was equally unflinching in his response: He told Tson to go and preach the Gospel. "He [the officer] made up his mind that if I was ready to die for it, then I should have it," Tson said. "And for another four years until they exiled me, I continued to preach with nobody disturbing me because that man, a key man in the secret police, decided I should be free to preach because I was ready to die for it."¹

Josef Tson has a theology of suffering. He knows what it means to deny self, take up that cross, and follow Christ and fellowship with Christ and His sufferings. Christ also has a theology of suffering that He sets forth in the second of the letters to the churches in Revelation, the church at Smyrna. What we learn from this letter is that *Christ is sovereign in our sufferings and empowers us to persevere through all of our trials, great and small, for His glory.*

I. His Person and Work (2:8)

By way of reminder, each of these letters opens with a reference to the nature of Jesus Christ, the author of the letters. These attributes were given to John in chapter 1 in the opening of the revelation and some aspect of those attributes is repeated specifically for the purpose of encouraging the church to which the letter is addressed.

1. Deity (v. 8a)

Christ's first described Himself as "**The first and the last,**" an unmistakable reference to His deity and eternity. This description of the deity of Christ as it relates to the Trinitarian Godhead is a fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith. Those that deny the "oneness" of the Trinity have all sorts of futile arguments, one being that wherever the name "Yahweh" or "Jehovah" is found in Scripture it always refers to the Father. This was the argument of one

¹ Adapted from a Baptist Press article by Jeff Robinson covering the 2004 Founders Conference in Birmingham, AL, <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=18713>, accessed June 7, 2008.

whom I assume was a Jehovah's Witness that I received a call from a few weeks ago. A Jehovah's Witness denies the "oneness" of the Godhead, believing the Trinity to refer to three separate persons, which is correct, while denying that the three are One. Their denial is heresy. They play theological mind games with many of the texts that specifically refer to the oneness of the Godhead, such as John 1:1 that straightforwardly states both that "the Word was with God," a distinction between the Father and the Son, and that "the Word was God," a testimony of the unity of the Father and the Son in the Godhead.

While there are many such references to the unity of the Trinity in Scripture, if given the liberty I would have asked this Jehovah's Witness to consider two texts from the prophet Isaiah and see how Christ Himself tied these in with His attestations in Revelation that He is **"the first and the last."** First, Isaiah 44:6 proclaims, "Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: 'I am the first and I am the last, and there is no God besides Me.'" Here the Lord God proclaims through Isaiah the same description that Christ takes on in Revelation 1:17, 2:8, and again in 22:13. Three times in Revelation Christ identified Himself with the Lord of Isaiah 44:6, who there proclaimed that He alone was the first and the last and that there is no God besides Him. Therefore, logic dictates that when Christ states in Revelation that He is **"the first and the last"** He is clearly stating that He is God.

Again in Isaiah 48:12, "Listen to Me, O Jacob, even Israel whom I called; I am He, I am the first, I am also the last." Then in Isaiah 48:16 we read, "Come near to Me, listen to this: From the first I have not spoken in secret, from the time it took place, I was there. And now the Lord GOD has sent Me, and His Spirit." While there is debate, I consider this to be the words of Christ Himself, who stated that He was present and speaking at "the first," identifying His words as God's words, and then He prophetically stated that He was sent by the Lord GOD and by His Spirit, distinguishing Him as the Second Person of the Godhead.

In this description **"the first and the last"** we then see first a plain identification of the person and work of Christ as the eternal God who has always existed, continues to exist, and will always exist.

2. Humanity (v. 8b)

Christ then referred to Himself as the One, **"Who was dead, and has come to life,"** literally, "Who became dead and who came to life and continues to live." This is a clear reference to the person and work of Christ in His humanity, to the eternal Son of God who came to this earth, put on flesh and dwelt among us (Jn. 1:14), who was tempted in all ways as we are yet without sin (Heb. 4:15), who at all times was perfectly obedient to the Law of God (2 Cor. 5:21), obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil. 2:8). It was in His humanity that Christ conquered death in His resurrection to life.

Peter referred to this glorious work in 1 Peter 3:18, "For Christ also died for sins once for all, *the* just for *the* unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit." The consequence of the Resurrection is described in Hebrews 7:16 as "the power of an indestructible life." The result for the believer Paul sets forth in Romans 6:8-10,

Romans 6:8-11 – ⁸ Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, ⁹ knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again; death no longer is master over Him. ¹⁰ For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. ¹¹ Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

That is the glory found in Him alone **“Who was dead, and has come to life.”** But why did these at Smyrna need to hear and remember these truths concerning the Person and Work of Christ? Why did they need to contemplate the wonder of His deity and His humanity, His eternality and His triumph over sin, death, the grave, and Satan through His death, burial, and resurrection? The answer is found in what He knew to be true about their church.

II. His Knowledge (2:9-10)

As we saw last week, each of the letters references Christ’s knowledge of each of the churches, introduced by the phrase, **“I know.”** We also mentioned last week that each of the letters contains the same form or structure with little variance. We encounter the variance as it pertains to these announcements of Christ’s knowledge. Christ commended all seven of the churches where He was able to commend them. He also condemned the churches – save two, Smyrna and Philadelphia. In those letters we find no condemnation from Christ. This does not mean that the churches were sinless or perfect. What it does mean is that their worship was right and their motives were pure. Simply put, these two churches were faithful churches.

Remember that the theme of the book of Revelation is the worship of the risen and conquering Christ. Anything already in the church that affected the church’s fellowship with Christ He condemned, as was the case with Ephesus who had left their **“first love”** (2:4). In the case of Smyrna and Philadelphia, Christ’s sets forth *potential* pitfalls to their worship of Him. It is interesting that these potential pitfalls or hindrances come from **“those who say they are Jews and are not”** in both instances (2:9; 3:9).

In this letter, Christ revealed His knowledge of the church both present and future.

1. Present (v. 9)

“Tribulation” is one of the recurring themes in Revelation. The word implies pressure or trouble or being in a tight spot. It can run the gamut from mild opposition to oppression to death for the sake of the gospel.² The church in Smyrna was in the midst of **“tribulation,”** and Christ knew it. Nothing escapes the attention of the all-seeing, all-knowing Christ. **“Tribulation,”** particularly oppression, often results in poverty because a person is often ostracized by society, fired from their job, refused acceptance into a **“major”** university, and their resources are cut off because of their testimony for Christ.

This was exactly what happened to the church at Smyrna. The church was set in the midst of a city that put a premium on emperor worship and the Roman religion. There was a temple dedicated to Rome. According to one commentator, **“It was impossible to have a share in the city’s public life without also having a part in some aspect of the imperial cult.”**³ Because of their refusal to participate in the rites of the imperial cult, the church as a whole faced **“tribulation”** and suffered for obeying Christ.

What an encouragement it must have been to have received this letter and heard that Christ knew of their plight! It did not catch He who is **“the first and the last”** by surprise. Further encouragement came from the analysis from Christ’s perspective. By the world’s standards they were impoverished, but from Christ’s vantage point they were **“rich.”** Their present sufferings would lead, in fact already had led, to eternal treasures. Phil Newton notes, **“They had a wealth**

² Phil Newton, http://www.southwoodsbc.org/sermons/revelation_02.08-17.html, accessed June 7, 2008.

³ Greg Beale, *NIGTC: The Book of Revelation*, 240-241.

that the other citizens of Smyrna knew nothing about. All the inheritance that belongs to Christ belonged to them. Their suffering would be brief while their bounty would be for eternity.”⁴

Additionally, the church at Smyrna heard the false accusations from Jews in the city. **“I know... the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.”** This persecution came from those who were racially Jewish, but spiritually they were not sons of Abraham. Paul described this group in Romans 2:28-29, “For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.” The Jews of Smyrna ridiculed the gospel and despised the truth that righteousness comes through faith in Christ alone apart from works of the Law. Jesus’ assessment of them was that they were **“a synagogue of Satan”** because of their blasphemous opposition to the truth in Christ. In contrast, the church fulfills this promise to Abraham since it stands as the true heir of righteousness by faith, having been circumcised in the heart through the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit. Again, how encouraging this news must have been to the church, knowing that Christ blessed their present faith in Him!

2. Future (v. 10b)

Their present situation was not the end of the story. Christ knew that they were about to suffer even greater tribulation, **“Do not fear what you are about to suffer.”** I like Phil Newton’s definition of the Greek word **“suffer.”** He said it means “to suffer.”⁵ The verb tense is in the present, implying an ongoing suffering and this suffering was near.

Their suffering for their obedience is spelled out by Christ. **“Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days.”** This irony is often the case when one suffers for their obedience. The truth that Joseph taught his brothers in Genesis 50:10, “You meant evil against me, *but* God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result,” is not uncommon. The works of the wicked are often allowed by God to test the faith of the upright. We see it in the life of Job, of Joseph, of Paul, of Peter. John Piper states, “The suffering of sickness and the suffering of persecution have this in common: they are both intended by Satan for the destruction of our faith, and governed by God for the purifying of our faith.”⁶

That is exactly what would happen to some in the church of Smyrna. Some would be **“cast into prison.”** This would be the work of the evil one who wanted to destroy the church. However, Christ reminded them that this was a time of testing, a time of purifying their faith. In other words, Christ knew it was going to happen, even ordained it and allowed it, for their benefit. And what greater encouragement than from the One, **“Who was dead, and has come to life”**? He who had endured more persecution and more suffering than any human in the history of mankind, culminating in His ruthless murder on the Cross by this very group **“who say they are Jews and are not,”** who did nothing more than serve their father who was the devil. This was the One who wrote these words, whose prison was the Cross of Calvary! Yet, He triumphed. And now He encouraged these at Smyrna to triumph as well. How were they to triumph? How could they press on in this culture that was so violently opposed to them? Christ closes with words of exhortation for the church.

⁴ http://www.southwoodsbc.org/sermons/revelation_02.08-17.html

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ John Piper, *Desiring God*, 216.

III. His Exhortation (2:10-11)

Each of the letters contains an imperative, a command for the church to obey to demonstrate their faithfulness to Christ. You will notice that the title of the sermon is in the form of a question, *Smyrna: Fearing the Future?* This is because we are not certain whether or not the church at Smyrna obeyed this exhortation. Unlike the church of Philadelphia, Christ leaves us without knowledge concerning their obedience. But this we do know: if they obeyed, the promises were great!

1. Do not fear (v. 10a)

Concerning their impending persecution, Christ commanded them, **“Do not fear what you are about to suffer.”**

Revelation 1:17-18 – ¹⁷ “Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, ¹⁸ and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades.”

Isaiah 44:7-8 – ⁷ “Who is like Me? Let him proclaim and declare it; yes, let him recount it to Me in order, from the time that I established the ancient nation. And let them declare to them the things that are coming and the events that are going to take place. ⁸ Do not tremble and do not be afraid; have I not long since announced *it* to you and declared *it*? And you are My witnesses. Is there any God besides Me, or is there any *other* Rock? I know of none.”

Isaiah 48:13 – “Surely My hand founded the earth, and My right hand spread out the heavens; when I call to them, they stand together.”

2. Be faithful (v. 10c)

“Be faithful until death.”

“The righteous will live by faith” (Hab. 2:4b). Not simply in the face of death, but in all things at all times in all situations. This call to the church at Smyrna to **“be faithful until death”** is often wrongly understood to mean that the believer should be willing to be martyred for his faith in Christ. While this is true, all are not called to martyrdom, nor will all be martyred. What it does mean is that the one who has come to faith in Christ should keep on being faithful *until* they die. There is a difference in having a faith that is willing *to* die and a faith *until* death. What Jesus called for was a consistent, day-to-day, persistent, persevering faith in all things, great and small.

3. The promise (v. 11)

“And I will give you the crown of life. He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.”

Conclusion

1. The believer can find comfort in the midst of suffering by recognizing that Christ is over all things. John Piper has a theology of suffering unlike any other pastor and writer today. In his

book *Desiring God* Piper reminds us that all Christian suffering in the path of obedience is a suffering both “with Christ” and “for Christ.”

All experiences of suffering in the path of Christian obedience, whether from persecution or sickness or accident, have this in common: they all threaten our faith in the goodness of God and tempt us to leave the path of obedience. Therefore, every triumph of faith and all perseverance in obedience are testimonies to the goodness of God and the preciousness of Christ—whether the enemy is sickness, Satan, sin, or sabotage. Therefore all suffering, of every kind, that we endure in the path of our Christian calling is a suffering “with Christ” and “for Christ.”⁷

Piper goes on to explain that this suffering is “with Christ” in the sense that it comes to us while we are walking with Him by faith and that it is by His strength one can endure. It is “for Him” in the sense that the suffering tests our allegiance to His goodness and power and reveals His worth as the all-sufficient prize.

2. The believer can gain strength in the midst of persecution when they realize that Christ has conquered death. The writer of Hebrews put it this way:

Hebrews 12:3-4 – ³ For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. ⁴ You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin.

3. Dying *for* the Lord begins by dying *to* self.

4. One of the greatest ways that God has given to test our faith and to glorify Him in the work of the gospel is persecution.

During one particularly harrowing session of interrogation, Josef Tson told his inquisitors that spilling his blood would only serve to water the growth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Part of the theology of suffering, he learned, was that tribulation is never an accident but is part of God’s sovereign plan for building His church. “I told the interrogator, ‘You should know your supreme weapon is killing. My supreme weapon is dying,’” Tson said.

“Now here is how it works, sir: You know that my sermons are on tape all over the country. When you shoot me or crush me, whichever way you choose, [you] only sprinkle my sermons with my blood. Everybody who has a tape of one of my sermons will pick it up and say, ‘I had better listen again. This man died for what he preached.’ Sir, my sermons will speak 10 times louder after you kill me and because you kill me. In fact, I will conquer this country for God because you killed me. Go on and do it.”

“Dying for the Lord is not an accident. It’s not a tragedy. It’s part of the job. It’s part of the ministry.”⁸

5. We fear the future when we don’t fear God.

Fear comes from faith in something or someone other than God. Fear of man, fear of failure, fear of rejection, etc. shows a lack of faith in God. Fear and persevering faith cannot exist in the same heart.

⁷ *Desiring God*, 216.

⁸ From Baptist Press article noted above, <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=18713>