

Session 2: Smyrna: Faithfulness in Suffering (Rev. 2:8-11)

INTRODUCTION

Let's go ahead and look at Revelation 2. We are continuing in our series here on Friday night—on the seven churches in the book of Revelation and understanding dimensions of our intimacy with God through the lens of these letters.

When Jesus had one more thing to say to the Church after the cross and the resurrection, He came back sixty years after the day of Pentecost approximately, about 90 AD, to the island of Patmos. He visited John the apostle and He said in essence, “I have one more thing to say to My Church.” He gave seven different messages as He was preparing the Church for the events that would unfold in the book of Revelation. These seven messages to seven churches were for the church of that generation. They were for seven local churches in Asia. They are for the Church throughout history, but they have a particular application for the people who would experience the events that were described in the book of Revelation right after these letters were given to John.

LETTER TO THE CHURCH IN SMYRNA

Let's read it. Revelation 2:8–11: “To the church in Smyrna” (v. 8, paraphrased). Now most of you know, all seven churches were in western Asia Minor, which is in modern-day Turkey. All seven of these churches were in western Turkey.

“To the angel”—or to the messenger—“of the church in Smyrna write, ‘These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life: “I know your works, I know your tribulation, I know your poverty; however, you really are rich. I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews, but they are not really Jews. They are Jews physically, but they are not really Jews, they are of the synagogue of Satan. Do not fear any of the things that these people will do to you. The things which you are about to suffer, things that are yet to come in the future. Indeed, I am going to tell you straight, you are about to suffer more in the future”’” (Rev. 2:8–11, paraphrased).

Jesus is speaking by the spirit of prophecy to a local church. “The devil is about to throw some of your church members into prison, that you may be tested” (v. 10 paraphrased). Not only are the people who are thrown into prison tested, but the entire body is tested when the members are thrown into prison, because the threat of trouble comes to everyone when a few are in trouble. And also the connectedness in love to the ones in prison causes suffering for the ones that are out of prison. He says, “You will have tribulation for ten days” (v. 10).

BE FAITHFUL UNTIL DEATH

The Lord says, “Here is what I want you to do. I want you to be faithful. I want you to be faithful to Me in the pressure” (v.10 paraphrased). If He was a modern-day preacher, He would find some way of telling them that all the pressures are going to go away. But Jesus did not say that.

He said, “I want you to face it. The trouble is going to increase in the near future and it is going to test all of you. I do not want you to quit. I do not want you to complain. I do not want you to fall into fear or into accusation” (v. 10, paraphrased). That is what pressure does. Many times it creates a spirit of accusation: “You are the reason we are under pressure.” Those kind of accusations.

He says, “What I want you to do is to be faithful”(v.10 paraphrased).

“How faithful? How long?”

“Until you die. If you die prematurely at the hands of persecutors, I will reward you, but I want you to be faithful until your last breath on the earth. And here is what I will do. I will give you the crown of life” (v.10 paraphrased).

We will discuss this in a few moments. This is not the same thing as the gift of eternal life that every born-again believer receives. He is talking about a specific reward given specifically to those who persevere in persecution. It says in verse 11, “He who has an ear, let Him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” Then He gives a second promise: “He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.”

JESUS ADDRESSES THE PERSECUTED CHURCH

Roman numeral I. The primary message. Jesus is addressing a persecuted church. The reason we care about it is because there are churches under persecution today in the world, particularly in communist countries or Islamic countries. Jesus is calling them to be fearless and faithful. He says, “I do not want you yielding to the spirit of fear. I want you to resist the spirit of fear, because the devil is going to try and put it on you. Even people are going to try and put it on you. Resist the spirit of fear and embrace the grace for faithfulness, because here is the good news: when the trouble increases, the glory of God in the congregation also increases.” I will give you the verse; it is in 1 Peter 4:14 (paraphrased), “When you suffer, the spirit of glory comes on you, which enables you to endure the trouble in a way that you cannot imagine you will be able to.”

This letter is written to people just like you and me, weak and broken people who are prone to fear and discouragement. Do not think that they were super-saints. There is no such thing as super-saints. All God has from Adam to the end is weak and broken people whom He empowers. The testimony of history is that millions of believers have stayed true under testing. Why? Because there is a spirit of glory that increases on them, which they do not have until the suffering starts.

THE PRIMARY MESSAGE

People think of the future and they think of trouble. They are afraid that fear might strike them. What this letter is meant to encourage is faith—that everything that Jesus commands us to do is the same thing as a promise of enabling. Every command contains a promise that He will enable us to fulfill it. When the Lord says something as consuming and all embracing as “Bridle your tongue,” there is an anointing and a promise to be able to fulfill this, if the command is given.

When He says, “Be faithful and do not fear,” those are the two big exhortations. “Do not yield to the spirit of fear and take hold of the grace of faithfulness, the grace of peace.” The *shalom* of God is the answer to the spirit of fear. This is a promise which it is in the reach of every single believer.

THE REWARD OF FAITHFULNESS

He says to this church—that He is going to give them the crown of life. The reward is going to greatly outweigh the sacrifice and the suffering. He says, “I promise you, when it is over, what I will give you for faithfulness is far greater. There is no way to compare it” (Rev. 2:10, paraphrased). You hear the testimony: “You never know what you will do if somebody says, ‘I am going to take your life’ until the day you get there.” I do not believe that. I believe we can have the assurance now that under the threat of death we can stand true. I do not believe we have to live and think, “I do not know; we will see when we get there.” I do not believe that; I am absolutely confident in the grace of God. If somebody puts a gun to my head, I am confident in the grace of God that I would not hesitate in proclaiming my loyalty to Jesus.

Not because it is heroic. Because the grace of God is able to do that, and He has shown true to millions of people throughout history under the threat of death. Many have died and many ended up not dying, but they stayed true. Do not have this kind of pseudo-psychology: “You never know until you get there.” It is not that I am a good follower; it is that He is a good leader. It is not that I am a good learner; He is a good teacher. Honestly. Our confidence in His leadership and His teaching ability is why we can make it. I do not have confidence in my ability to learn. I am a slow learner, but He is a good teacher. This is true.

THE CITY AND CHURCH OF SMYRNA

Roman numeral II. The church of Smyrna. Just a statement or two: it was a large harbor city, a very prosperous city on the coast—on the Aegean Sea—in what would today be western Turkey. All the citizens of the city were required to worship in the pagan temples. This city had many temples in it. Once a year, everybody was required to worship there—at least once a year. Of course they encourage much more participation than that. They would go through the city, house by house, and they would require everybody to burn incense on the altar of Caesar or to proclaim that Caesar was God, that the emperor was God. Of course the Christians refused it and they were considered criminals of the state. To not honor Caesar was the same as not being a noble citizen.

They said, “If you will not honor Caesar, maybe you will yield to a hostile army that might come in. If you are not loyal to our city, why are we allowing you to be a member here?”

“No, it is not that we are going to betray our city under an attack from a foreign army. It is that there was a Jewish Man who died and was raised from the dead.”

They said, “That is foolishness. We do not buy that. We require you to show your loyalty to this city and to the Roman empire because of the threat of the invading armies.”

To the people requiring it, it was military security. It was financial security. To the Christians resisting it, it was spiritual. But there was a massive disconnection between the two. Many lost their life because of it. They were burned on the stake or they were thrown to the wild beasts.

PERSECUTION BY JEWS

In Smyrna particularly, there was a large Jewish population who claimed to love the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and to honor the Torah, the Old Testament Law. Jesus said, “They are liars. They do not honor the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They are Jewish physically, but they do not honor the Word of God; they are liars” (Rev. 2:9, paraphrased).

These were the ones who were pointing these Christian converts out to the Roman authorities. History from this part of the world tells us that they would go to the Roman authorities and say, “That guy is a Christian.” They would point them out and turn them in. They were openly hostile and aggressive to the Christians. The Jews were particularly. That was not true of every city, but in this one city, it was true. Jesus understood this in a very special way because He understood the rejection of His own country.

JESUS’ REVELATION OF HIMSELF

Roman numeral III. The revelation of Jesus Himself. In each of the seven letters, Jesus highlights some of the glory He revealed in Revelation 1. In Revelation 1:12–20, Jesus appeared in His glory, and then for each of the seven letters, He takes one or two of the facets of His glory from Revelation 1. He applies it to the unique circumstances of that church. Jesus said, “I am the First and the Last. I am the One who was dead and I am the One who came to life” (Rev. 2:8, paraphrased). He applies this particularly to this persecuted church.

We will draw on this verse, Revelation 2:8, as persecution increases before the coming of the Lord. Again, in other parts of the world it is happening right now. In Islamic nations and in communist nations. We do not want to talk about persecution as though it is future. Our precious brothers and sisters would say, “What do you mean it is future? Are we not in this together? It is now!”

I AM THE FIRST AND THE LAST

Revelation 2:8 will be a source of strength and will release the glory of God to our spirit when we tap into this revelation of Jesus. He says, “I am the First and the Last” (paraphrased). In other words, He is the First. He is at the beginning. He is the source of all blessing.

They were losing their money. They were really losing money. It was not hypothetical. Some were losing their lives, but the majority of them were losing their businesses. Smyrna was a prosperous city and undoubtedly many were doing well until they confessed Jesus. They lost business opportunities. They were losing their property. They were saying, “Lord?”

He says, “I am the First. I am the source of everything you have. Trust Me, it is in My hand. I know what you are losing and I know what I am going to give you in return. I am the First. I am the source of everything good you have, which is being threatened with loss. And not only am I

the First, I am the Last. I am the only One who knows the end of the story. You do not know it. Your persecutors do not know it. I am at the end of the story. I am telling you from the vantage point of seeing its conclusion that you are in good hands. There is no guess work with Me. I have all the power. I am the First. I am the source of everything you have. All that you lost, I can give it to you again. I am at the end of the story and I know how it ends. I love you and I am with you” (Rev. 2:8, paraphrased).

I love the song in which we sing, “I know the end of the story, and this is not the end of the story.” I was about to break out and start singing it, but I am afraid I would lose you. Another one of the songs—“Something bigger’s going on.” There is something bigger. He knows the end of the story. There is a big story and you are a part of it. He is at the end of it, looking back, telling you with certainty that He has the ability to promise you that it will end right. He has the power and authority to determine the end.

I WAS DEAD AND CAME TO LIFE

Paragraph B. He goes on to the next description of His glory. He said, “I was dead and I came to life” (v. 8, paraphrased). This is intense. He is saying, “I am the First, so therefore I have to be God. I am before all things.” It is a paradox that He could be the First—in other words, the eternal God. Before everything else existed, He was, yet He is a Man. How can somebody who is the First—how can someone who is God—be Man? He says, “Not only do I know the Last, but when I died, I suffered through the pain of what you are going through” (v. 8, paraphrased).

When He says, “I was dead,” He is saying, “I am human and I suffered through it. It hurt Me like it hurt you. I do understand.” He is not just saying, “I died and I had the victory.” He is saying, “I know the pain of the process of death. I am watching. I understand. I will not forsake you. I went through it, and the good news is that I came out with victory. I know the way through death. I did it! I rose from the jaws of death. I broke its power. The power is in My hands and *you* are in My hands.” When He says, “I came to life,” there is no demonic power, there’s no physical power, there’s nothing that can constrain Him and hold Him back. Nothing! Nothing! Absolutely nothing! And the same for the life of a person who submits to the Lord.

AFFIRMATION FOR FAITHFULNESS

Roman numeral IV. His affirmation for faithfulness for the church of Smyrna. Verse 9 (paraphrased), “I know your works”—your labors in ministry—“I know your tribulation”—how much pressure you are in—“and I know your poverty”—how much you lost. “I know your works, how much labor you have done.”

They say, “I have worked all this time and they came and I lost it all.”

He says, “I know. I know your works; I know how hard you have worked for Me. I know the tribulation and pressure you are in, and I know your poverty. I know the loss you have suffered. I know it. However, I have good news for you, because I am at the end of the story and you are not. You are rich. You have gold you know not of. It will absolutely overwhelm you with joy

when you see it.” That is what Peter says in 1 Peter 1:6–7 (paraphrased): “Rejoice greatly, because your testing will result in gold.” He says, “You are rich.”

Now here is my desire: as much as I embrace the first part, the works of tribulation—I mean, it is not poverty for the sake of poverty; it is poverty because of their conviction of obedience; it was poverty because of persecution in this case—I want to have insight into the wealth that I have, now, in this age. I do not want to live in obedience and wonder if it is really working in God’s eyes.

ETERNAL RICHES

A lot of people, just by a religious spirit and the spirit of fear, will live what seems like obedience. And a lot of it is obedience, but they are doing it more out of fear than out of revelation and conviction. He says, “You are rich.” I like to take that little phrase and say, “Lord, stamp that on my heart now. I want to feel rich in my spirit”—meaning, rich in God in the age to come.

I do not want to live in doubt and uncertainty about the transaction that is really happening between my heart and God’s. It is not humility to be in doubt about the Lord’s reward for your life. I do not know the specific dimension of the Lord’s reward for my life. But I tell you, I care about having conviction and revelation that my life in His eyes is rich and that I am getting richer and richer as the years go on. It gives me power in my heart to love. Jesus stood in front of John, saying, “Tell them they are rich. Tell them that they do not know how great the exchange really is. They have given up their weakness in a spirit of obedience and love, and I am giving them wealth which they can never lose because of it.”

Again, I do not want to proceed in my Christian life unsure of this. The Lord wants us to go forward with a conviction that it matters and that He remembers—that He really is going to meet us with wealth in the age to come. He says, “I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and they are not. They are really of the synagogue of Satan” (v. 9, paraphrased).

I KNOW YOUR WORKS AND TRIBULATION

I want to focus on one word that is mentioned twice. He says, “I know.” The word “know”—this is the very essence of intimacy with God: that He knows what we feel and that we know how He feels. That is at the very core of intimacy with God. In each one of these letters, Jesus is careful to tell them, “I want you to know that I know. I see how you feel and I want you to know how I feel.” In each one of the letters, He tells them how He feels. It is not enough just to be caught up in duty. I want to know that He knows what I am feeling.

“Lord, I obey You because I *want* to obey You. Lord, I am sacrificing because I love You. Do You know?”

“Yes. I know your labors. I know it. I see it.”

“Do You know what I am feeling? I am doing this and I feel like giving up, but if I know that You know that I am seeking to love You, it changes everything.”

He says, “Go tell them, “I know! I know their labor, I know how hard they are working for Me when nobody can see. I know the pressure, the tribulation, I know the poverty and how much they have lost. I know that there are religious people who claim to know the Word of God and who are standing against them.” He says, “I know it, I see it. Trust Me, I do not believe their story against you.”

It is not so important to me that they were Jewish, but they were people who were claiming to be in covenant with God, who knew the Word of God, who loved the Word of God, and they were the ones resisting these believers. The Lord says, “I’ve got the whole picture. I know it, I see it.”

I KNOW YOUR POVERTY

Paragraph B. “I know your . . . poverty.” They were losing business opportunities. Some of you have lost business opportunities because of your convictions, before any great persecution happened in the land. Just out of righteousness. Sometimes that troubles believers. They say, “Lord, this is a bad deal. I thought if I obeyed You that I would end up with more money in this deal.”

The Lord says, “You will end up with more money on the other side. You will not always end up with more money on this side.”

A lot of believers have a kind of built-in twenty-first century Western mindset, which believes that obedience always leads to more money if God is in it. The Lord says, “I know your poverty. I know you are poor because you are obeying Me.”

There is a very strong mindset in the twenty-first century Western world, even in the kingdom of God: “If it is God, it must produce more money.” I have had people say to me over the years when the Lord gives a great financial blessing: “It must be God, because the money is increasing.” In some of those situations it really was the hand of God, but not always because the money increased. That is more of a secular paradigm than a biblical paradigm. There are times when the money increases in the will of God, and there are times when you are in the perfect will of God and the money decreases.

SPIRITUAL POVERTY

The opposite was happening with the Laodiceans. Revelation 3:17 (paraphrased): “You have a lot of money and you think My blessing is on you. But you do not realize that you are poor. When you stand before Me, you will have very little on the last day.”

“Wait, how can we have so much money flowing in our midst?”

Though sometimes the Lord will use financial blessing, it is not a sure thermometer every time. It is the Word of God that we go by.

There are many prosperous people who are spiritually poor, and there are many people who are financially poor but are spiritually rich in God. There is more to it than the amount of money. So when a guy says, “I obeyed God, I gave money,” or “I refused a deal out of conviction, but it is five years later and I am not ahead,” I say, “Quit reading your self-help Western world books and start reading your Bible.” You will not always be ahead in this age because you do right. Many times you will lose in this age because you do right. The Lord says, “Forever you will gain.” That is why we are supposed to be tapping into eternity and not only into natural blessings to measure our relationship with God.

PERSECUTION

Paragraph C. “All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” (2 Tim. 3:12). This verse does not seem that real in the Western world. We say, “Well, Lord, most of us are going hard, but it is not tough.” There are times in history—pockets of time where this does not seem to be as intense as other times. But I am getting ready for it to be the norm: for righteousness to be resisted at a higher level than it is right now in the Western world. Or maybe our righteousness is not that different than what everybody else is doing, and maybe we are just blending in and it is not really what we think it is. I will not go there, but it is worth asking the question. Paragraph D: there will be persecution in the end times, which affects finances.

GOD’S OWNERSHIP OVER THE GOLD AND THE SILVER

Paragraph E. However, now it seems like I am going to say exactly the opposite. It is not all one or all the other. There will be tremendous transfer of wealth in the end times, even in the midst of financial boycotts and sanctions that the Antichrist will put upon believers across the world. God will show His ownership over the gold and the silver, even in the time when He shakes all the nations and brings the nations to Himself under the title of the Desire of All Nations. The Desire of All Nations in this passage is Jesus, and it is talking about the great harvest. At the time of the great harvest, God is going to show the nations that the gold has really been His all along.

What is it going to be? Financial trouble or supernatural prosperity? I believe it is both. Both of them will be happening simultaneously. Who gets the financial difficulty and who gets the financial prosperity? I believe it will be under the lordship of Jesus in different seasons. Many times it will be the same person in different seasons. What the Lord wants us to do is trust Him. Trust Him as being the First, the one who supplies, the source, and the Last, the one whose perfect wisdom knows how to administrate it. It is not just that He is the First and the Last, but that He is the one who gave His blessing and knows how to administrate it. He says, “I died. I went through it. I know what you are going through, trust Me. I know what you need. I really do. I am not overlooking you.” We have to trust in the Jesus of Revelation 1:8.

BEING RICH IN GOD

Paragraph F. He says, “You are rich.” The idea of being rich in God is a principle that Jesus talked about over and over in the gospels. It is not often mentioned in context to the Western world. We mostly talk about being rich in our bank accounts. Jesus often talked about being rich

in God. We need to unashamedly be committed to being rich in God, to being great in God. You can say it either way.

I remember when I was in my twenties. I am fifty-two now, so it was some years ago. That was a time when I determined that it was God's destiny for me and every believer to be great in God and to be rich in God. That was His invitation. But I could only get there through the doorway of the Sermon on the Mount. There is no other way to be great in God or rich in God in the age to come. There is no other way, except through the doorway of the Sermon on the Mount.

I remember I made a fierce determination in the grace of God: "I am going to be great in God; I am going to be rich in God. I am not going to be ashamed of it; I am going for it unashamedly." And I set it as my life goal. I said, "I will do whatever I need to do on this side, because that is my goal when I stand before You: that You would look at my life and see my decisions as great, and that You would reward me in Your presence—in a way that You would understand that would be great." I felt the Lord smile over me. Ever since that time, any time I think this thing, I feel His smile. I feel Him saying, "I really will, if you go all the way; I really will. This is what My heart is."

POVERTY IS NOT A SIGN OF SPIRITUALITY

Now lest we get out of balance, paragraph G, poverty in itself is not a sign of spirituality. I made a commitment to the Lord: I want the Lord to give me billions of dollars. I want to live simply. I do not want to use the billions on my personal life. I want supernatural prosperity, but I have committed to live simply. I do not believe poverty is a sign of spirituality. I believe that giving is a sign of spirituality, not poverty. If I live simply because of a conviction to give and a grace to give, that is the wisdom of God.

Some people do not improve their mind. They do not do hard work. They do not have any vision and they just live, spinning in circles in poverty. Somehow we equate that with spirituality. Mostly it is aimlessness and laziness. They go to a few prayer meetings so that it makes them feel better about it. You cannot go to prayer meetings and dismiss laziness and aimlessness in life. If you are going to them because of your conviction to do the will of God, that is another thing. We have young people who come here who are just going to hang out and chill at IHOP–KC for ten or twenty years. They think that somehow this is spiritual. No, no! Have a vision to be a billionaire. Give 99.9 percent of it away, live simply, fund the gospel, and go to IHOP–KC. That is what I am trying to do.

The reason I am talking about the money thing is that when you talk about poverty, it gets funny. There are two extremes. There is an unbiblical mindset of poverty and there is an unbiblical mindset of prosperity, and both of them are in the Church. One person looks at the other and they say, "Bah, humbug," and both of them are wrong. Let's be prosperous, but let's abound in giving and live simply. Not everybody is called to do that, but many of us are.

JESUS DID NOT CORRECT THIS CHURCH

Roman numeral V. This church receives no correction for compromise. That is a remarkable thing. There are only two of the seven churches that Jesus gave no rebuke to: the church of Smyrna and the church of Philadelphia. It is interesting, paragraph B, that these are the two churches of which Jesus said, “In that city, there was a synagogue of Satan.” The pressure of this demonically energized group of people against them actually produced a zeal and a purity.

Of course they had to respond to Holy Spirit rightly to have that. Pressure does not gain us anything. It is pressure with a godly response. But that is not quite it. It is pressure with a godly response that is consistent to the end. The Lord gives us some contingency for the flesh and for weakness if we cry and complain a few times along the way, but we repent and press delete. And that still works. In the Lord’s kingdom, that is still called consistent. How many of you can say, “Praise the Lord for that”?

“Ah, Lord, I quit.”

A day or two later you say, “Oh, Lord, that was so bad. I repent.”

The Lord says, “You know what—you forget it, I will forget it. You are still consistent.” I love the grace of God.

DEMONIC OPPOSITION

It is not an accident that this demonically energized group of people in this city who were set on their destruction is called the synagogue of Satan. They were demonically energized people who even claimed to be in covenant with God and loyal to the Word. They were attacking them. It produced a godly response in these two congregations—Smyrna and Philadelphia—and that is the key. Pressure alone is not enough. We have to respond and we have to respond consistently. Not perfectly, but consistently. Those are different. Both of these churches are the only two who received no correction from the Lord.

EXHORTATION TO RESPOND

Roman numeral VI. Exhortation to respond. Now He said, “Do not fear those things which you are about to suffer” (Rev. 2:10, paraphrased). Imagine some guy standing up in the congregation, “Yea, says the Lord, ‘Do not fear, you are about to suffer.’”

We would all stand up and say, “In the name of Jesus, we bind you.” This is partly right because Jesus went on and said, “It is the devil.”

“What? Jesus, it is the devil? How can the devil touch me?”

Because the Lord allows the element of persecution. It is not unmeasured; the devil is still on a leash. The devil cannot do everything he wants. But God allows the devil a certain amount of liberty of action against the saints, to strike against the saints. Because God knows that it brings purity to the saints and an increase of the gospel. The theology of this just would not work in a lot of charismatic churches today. “Jesus, you need to go to Bible school,” is what they might be

tempted to say. Of course they would not. This just does not work in a whole lot of Bible schools, this theology.

DO NOT FEAR

“Do not fear.” The command to live free of fear is the promise of the enabling to do it. With the 1 Peter 4:14 spirit of glory when we suffer, there is a greater experience of the presence of God when the pressure increases. It is true. We had Brother Yun with us, the man from the underground church in China who wrote the book *The Heavenly Man*. He went to prison for three years. They broke his legs; they beat him. He got out of prison and went back in for four more years. He wrote in the book *The Heavenly Man* of how the Lord visited him in glory in suffering. He was here two weeks ago to testify to us. He said, “In truth, I am not exaggerating: I have never known the presence of God like I did in that cell, never. It was just like resting on me in the most remarkable way. I certainly do not have that now.”

“Well, do you want to go back into prison?”

“Ouch. I love that presence. I do not want anybody to ask me that question.”

So I said, “Let’s just leave that one alone—on the table (left for future consideration).”

THE LORD WARNS US AHEAD OF TIME

He says, “The devil is about to throw some of you into prison that you may be tested. You will have tribulation ten days. Do not quit. Do not accuse. Do not accuse the people coming against you and do not accuse your own people who are opening up the door to it” (Rev. 2:10, paraphrased).

According to different theories, you know—“You caused it. No, you caused it. If you would not have done this, it would not have happened.”

He says, “Do not do any of that. Be faithful.”

“How long?”

“Until you die—whether you die in the persecution or you die naturally—be faithful until your last breath. It may result in death.”

Paragraph A. Jesus wanted them to know that some would face prison and some would face death. In John 16:1 (paraphrased), Jesus said, “I have spoken these things to you so you would not stumble, so you would not be offended. I am telling you ahead of time about suffering, so that when you suffer, you will say, ‘Oh, this was always in the plan of God. God did not lose interest. God did not lose control of the world. God did not forget about me. When He liked me and when He appeared to be in control of everything, He told me this was going to happen.’”

Because when the trouble comes, the devil whispers, “The Lord forgot you. The Lord is not ruling in the way you thought He was.”

When everything is good, He tells us, “I am going to let this happen. I am going to let you be tested.” He speaks it to us ahead of time.

GLORY AND TROUBLE ARE COMING

The book of Revelation is a powerful statement of love and power from the heart of Jesus that trouble and glory are both coming. That is why it is very important that we take the book of Revelation seriously. And of course, we are prepared for the events of the book of Revelation, the glory and the trouble—these are the two categories of events. We are prepared for those events by these seven messages. That is why it is important that we go deeper in these messages.

Paragraph B. The persecution was clearly the work of Satan. It was evil men inspired by the devil. We think, “Why? When? How about me? Where?”—all of these unknowns. The element of the unknown—the Lord wants it. We do not know who, when, or how long. He wants us to have peace, not by having the information, but by having a relationship with Him in the present tense.

“Lord, like in a year? Ten years? Will I suffer for a month or a year? Could you tip me off a little bit?”

“No. I will tip you off in this way: I am the First; I am the source of your blessing. And I am the Last; I am at the end of it, and I see the whole thing, and you will be blessed. I was dead; I suffered and went through it. I know what the pain is, but I am alive. I know the way to victory and I have you in my hand. That is what I will tell you.”

“Come on, Lord, tell me some more.”

“No. If you know those four things, you will be equipped.”

SOME ARE DELIVERED, SOME DIE

Paragraph C. The Lord delivered some from prison, like Peter. Peter was in prison twice—two times. You say, “It is not fair.” Twice he was in prison and the doors open. Twice, not once. Then he dies in his sixties. History says he was crucified upside down. He was martyred. Why could Jesus open prison doors with angels twice and then let him die? The Lord says, “It was within my purpose to allow this to happen.”

For James, it was the opposite. James is in prison and he gets killed. Like John the Baptist, the greatest man ever born of a woman (Mt. 11:11). They get killed in prison. Paul—he is in prison, then he is delivered, but he is delivered by natural means. Peter was delivered by angelic means. Paul is in prison again, then he is out. Then he is back in, then he gets killed. It is like, “Which is it? Are you in or are you out?” Who do I want to be? Peter, James, John the Baptist, Paul? You

just do not know which way God is going to lead you in your life or in the life of someone you love. You do not know. The Lord says, “Just trust me.”

Verse 8 (paraphrased), “I am the First, the source of all blessing. And I am the Last; I know the end of the story, where it is going. And you will be happy. I was dead; I went through it. I know exactly how you will feel. But I know the way to victory. I am alive now and I have power in My hand over that which will afflict you. Trust Me on those four points.”

JESUS ALLOWS IMPRISONMENT

Paragraph D. Jesus allows imprisonment of His servants. Why? To magnify His testimony through their faithfulness. In other words—Peter says it here—that the genuineness of our faith is magnified (1 Pt. 1:7). Not only does it change us, it purifies us, and we get rewarded forever for it. That is a good point in itself.

Brother Yun was suffering. That was a personal thing, but corporately, many in the underground church in China, the guards, the officials, and the people in society in general were saying, “What is it that you know that we do not know? How come you will not give in? Why won’t you give in?”

“He is lovely. He is altogether lovely. This is my Beloved.”

“What is it that you know about this invisible Jewish Man that we do not know?”

The testimony of our genuineness magnifies the glory of God, and many get saved because the nations are in search of something worth dying for. So the Lord says, “In love, I am going to exhibit you as one who shows forth that I am Someone worth dying for.” And many will be moved. Because that is the cry of everyone’s spirit: to have something worth dying for.

COUNTED WORTHY TO SUFFER

The Lord says, “You love Me and I love you.” And the apostles here in Acts 5:41 said it right: they were counted worthy to be used this way. Because not only does the Lord increase the glory in the person in this age; He also increases the reward in the age to come. He magnifies the glory of God so unbelievers see the suffering vessel and say, “What is it that I do not have in life, which that man or woman has?” That is what the Lord calls being a bondservant and a trophy of His love. The apostles understood it, and they said, “We were worthy to be counted as ones who would be martyred for the Lamb” (Acts 5:41, paraphrased).

Paragraph E. Be faithful until death. Again, the command is a promise of enabling. God will help the weak of the earth, all of us. There are no super-saints; everybody is weak and broken. Paul and Peter—all of them. It is not how mighty they were.

I have heard this story over and over. I have talked to a number of persecuted saints over the years. They say, “The grace of God is on your spirit in a way that is so unusual, you get

intoxicated by it; you get addicted to it; you want it. You want more of it. And when the persecution lifts, an element of this lifts off of you.”

MARTYRDOM

The Church today needs a clear New Testament theology of martyrdom. Now, I do not want to glorify martyrdom in a trite way. There are some who talk about martyrdom, but they do not know anybody they love who has been martyred. It is more like romantic Hollywood stuff, but they have never met anybody whose life has been crushed. Until we know somebody, we are a little softer on the front end until it touches us. I believe that there is a rejoicing in it, but I think it is better that we openly declare our glory in it after we are experiencing it, not before in some cavalier kind of way, like, “We lost a little bit of money this week, and we are depressed, but we are willing to be a martyr.”

The reason I say that is because we need to establish a theology of martyrdom. But what I am not interested in is a kind of cavalier, proud, unbroken kind of—“Are we not cool? We are the ones who preach on martyrdom.” Because martyrdom is not a joke; it is real and it really hurts. And I do not mean just physically; it hurts people’s hearts and a lot happens. But I am saying soberly, in a measured way, not in a kind of proud enthusiasm: “We need to begin to go forward in this very serious subject and preach about it and teach on it with a spirit of brokenness and a contrite spirit.”

Here is what is going to happen—here is just a point or two about a theology of martyrdom. In Revelation 13:7 (paraphrased), it says, “It was granted”—and the meaning is “by God”—“to the Antichrist to make war with the saints and to overcome them.”

“What?”

The Antichrist is given authority by God for three and a half years to overcome the saints. It means physically, with martyrdom. To kill them. Look at the other passage in Revelation 12:11 (paraphrased): “The saints overcome the Antichrist.” Now which is it? Does he overcome us or do we overcome him? He will overcome believers physically. We will overcome him spiritually. We will be victorious in love, because we will not back up even one inch under his threats. So in this we overcome him. We overcome him by having victory in love in the face of his threats. He loses.

TWO PROMISES

Let’s go to Roman numeral VII: the promise for the overcomers. Two promises: He promises the crown of life, and He promises that we would not be hurt by the second death. Now I want to say this: these are not promises that are automatic to every born-again believer, whether they are faithful under pressure or not. Because there were a number of believers in these seven churches of Revelation who were not faithful, but they were born again. Like the church of Ephesus: they were hard working, they were diligent, they tested false apostles, but they had not overcome in love yet. They were still saved. If they died that day, they would not have gone to hell, but they had not yet entered into the grace of faithfulness through those pressures.

So these are promises given to those in the Body of Christ who are faithful under the prescribed specific pressures, which are outlined in these seven different letters. The crown of life is more than being born again and having eternal life. It is a dimension of authority and ruling in the age to come that is related to our faithfulness in this age.

NOT HURT BY THE SECOND DEATH

Not being hurt by the second death. What was happening was that their money was hurt by persecution, their body was hurt by persecution, their hearts were hurt by persecution, and the persecutors were gloating.

But there is a great and terrible day coming when all mankind will stand before the Father. All will stand before Him. The saints have already been evaluated and judged and received their reward. But every eye will witness it. And those very persecutors, on that terrible and wonderful day, will suffer harm. And I tell you, the awful majesty and the terribleness of that day will resound in our spirit, as we see the mighty wrath of God poured out in the second death and the mass of humanity is thrown into the Lake of Fire. The words will resound in our spirit: “We lose nothing on this day, but only those who stood against the kingdom will lose.” That is what Jesus was saying here. Amen.



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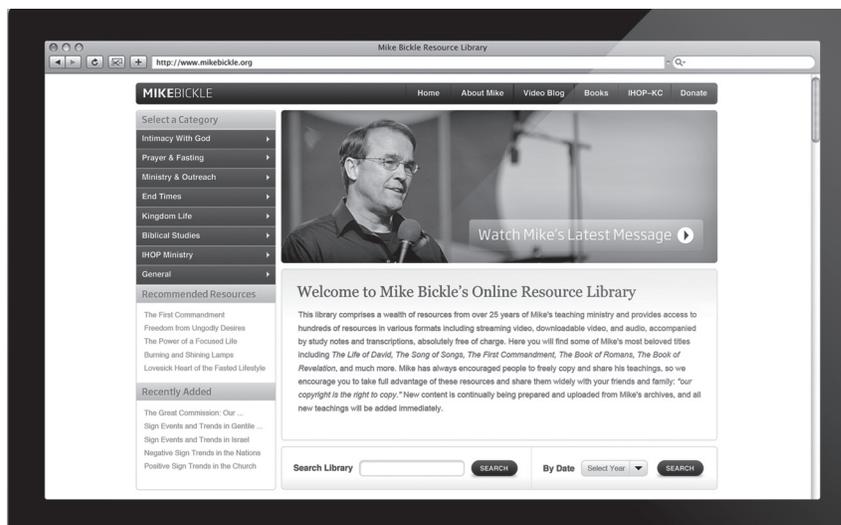
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