



Faithful Unto Death

Seven Letters to the Churches: Revelation Series #2

Revelation 2:8-11

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Let's take our Bibles and turn to Revelation 2. This is the second of the seven letters to the churches in Asia that are found in the book of Revelation. About a month ago we looked at the letter to the church in Ephesus. The theme was Jesus calling this church back to their first love, saying, "Your doctrine's good. Your actions are good. But I have this against you: that you've lost the love you had at first."

Now we're looking at this message to the church in Smyrna. The overarching theme of this message to them is: Be faithful unto death.

Let me open in a word of prayer.

God, we are grateful for the truth that You are all we need. Regardless of what comes at us or faces us in this life, we can trust You because You have given us Yourself—and that's enough. So I pray that You would cause us to be a people who are built up in our faith. Even this morning as we look at Your Word, encourage us strengthen our faith, that we would be faithful to You until death. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Last night our family was watching fireworks in Itasca which I think are the best fireworks around. After about 25 minutes of fireworks, the final song they were playing was "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." At the end of that song there's a line that says, "As He died to make men holy, so we die to make men free." Some hymnals have changed that to "we live to make men free." But either way, this hymn mingles the thought about what Christ has done for us in His death in setting us free from sin and a patriotic thinking about those who have died for our freedoms.

As I was growing up the Fourth of July was my favorite holiday, primarily because of the fireworks. Blowing up things and lighting things on fire was fun. But the more I grew up, the

more I realized the significance of thinking back. This weekend we celebrated 239 years as a nation, remembering our independence, remembering our freedoms and thinking back on those who gave their lives for these freedoms.

There's a famous quote by Patrick Henry where he said, "Give me liberty or give me death." Leading up to that line, he said, "Is life so dear or peace so sweet as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God. I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death."

Around that same time, Nathan Hale—right before he was hanged by the British—said, "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country."

One more quote: Joseph Warren said, "Nevertheless, to the persecution and tyranny of his cruel ministry we will not tamely submit. Appealing to heaven for the justice of our cause, we determine to die or be free." There were many during that time who looked at freedom as something worth dying for—for this nation, for the independence, they saw that as a worthy cause for which to give their lives.

I wonder, "Is there someone or something today that I would be willing to die for?" Have you ever asked yourself that? Is there something right now, that if I were faced with this, I would give my life?

Instantly what comes to my mind is my family. I know beyond the shadow of a doubt I would lay my life down for my family. I think there are close friends—some of you, probably not all of you—I think I would. I don't know. It's possible that I would die for any one of you if the situation arose.

We think about what we value, don't we? It's not that I would value my life more than yours. But I think what would be going through my head is, "Do I love this person more?" Let's take it beyond this room. Let's just say it's somebody I don't even know. Do I love this person more, or do I love my family more? So if I died, is that a wise way of caring for my family? I think we begin to think through all those kinds of things.

If you take Patrick Henry's phrase, "Give me liberty or give me death," what could go in that blank for you? "Give me _____ or give me death." Many Christians around the world throughout history and today would be able to say, "Jesus is right there." Some have had to act on that, saying, "Give me Jesus." With a gun to their head, they would say, "I choose Jesus over my own life." Hopefully all Christians would be able to live that out.

Christ is calling this church in Smyrna to not fear what's ahead, but to be faithful to Him until death. He doesn't have anything bad to say about this church in this message to them. He's

simply calling them to persevere, calling them to hang on, calling them to be faithful to Him even until death.

Let's read Revelation 2:8-11:

⁸ *"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."*

The overarching theme of this message to the church of Smyrna is: Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Be faithful until death.

I mentioned last time that in every one of these letters there's a line in here that says, "He"—that's singular, an individual—"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." There's a call for each one of us. These, I believe, were real, historic letters, real messages that were given to these seven churches. Corporately, as a local church, they needed to hear these messages. There was something specifically going on in each situation where they needed the rebuke or encouragement.

But in every one of these letters there's also a call to the individual—for each person, for everyone who has an ear—to hear what the Spirit says to these churches. So today we need to hear this call from our Savior where He says, "Be faithful to Me until death." I want us to look at four things from this text, four truths that can lead us and help us be faithful to our Savior until death.

First, we see that Jesus knows our sufferings. Look at what He says to them: "*I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich)...*" In this parenthesis He's talking about their richness in Christ, that they are children of the King, that their Father is the Sovereign over the universe. Spiritually, they have all these blessings. You can almost hear the prayer from Ephesians 1 where Paul goes on and on about the spiritual riches we have in Christ. Jesus is saying, "Though you are poor here in this life, you are rich—remember that. Remember what you've been given. Remember your spiritual blessings and be built up in that." At the same time He knows. As we begin to face trials, tribulation, suffering or persecution, it's very easy and tempting to feel like He doesn't know, or He doesn't care, or He's lost a little bit of control or

concern. Our natural reaction to that can be, “God, where are You? God, don’t You see what I’m going through? Don’t You know? Don’t You care?”

But here Jesus is saying to this church, “I know. I know your tribulation. I know your poverty. I know you are being slandered.” Back in Revelation 1, where John describes Jesus in all His glory, one of the things he says is that Jesus is the One Who walks among the seven golden lampstands. Jesus is here presently.

We looked at that last time in the letter to Ephesus. He’s here with His church. He’s walking among us, and He knows. He’s not just sovereign over all things and in control of all things. Specifically to this church who was going through difficulty, Jesus says, “I know.” And we can take great comfort in that, rest in that, believing the truth that Jesus knows.

Jesus knows what it’s like to be mocked. He knows what it’s like to be despised. He knows what it’s like to be rejected. He knows what it’s like to have little to nothing. He knows what it’s like to suffer. He knows what it’s like to die. He doesn’t just know about your suffering. He doesn’t just know that you are suffering. He knows what it’s like. So remember this truth: Jesus knows our suffering and our tribulation.

Based on that, **point two is that Jesus calls us to fearless faithfulness until death.** Jesus knew that this church was under tribulation, that it was poor. It was likely that if they were not fully aligned with and submitting to Rome and the rulers over them, it would lead to difficulty in their lives. It would be difficult to engage in business and make a living. He knew many in the church were poor. It says they were being slandered by those who were called Jews but were actually of the synagogue of Satan. This points back to other Scriptures that say not all of Israel is Israel. Not all people who claim to be God’s people are truly God’s people. So there were some who were claiming to be God’s people, yet they were slandering and probably were pointing out these Christians and saying bad things about them to the Romans, siding with the rulers and leading to more suffering and tribulation.

Jesus knew they were experiencing this kind of slander and mocking. In the middle of all that He says, “*Do not fear...*” Jesus calls them to fearless faithfulness until death. So it was not just what they had been going through, but there was fear of what was coming. Jesus says, “*Do not fear what you are about to suffer.*” And He tells them, “*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.*”

Even the way this is worded, I think it is helpful for us in the way we think about suffering, in the way we think about our trials. We sometimes sing these lyrics, which are based on the book of Job:

Though You slay me
Yet I will praise You
Though You take from me
I will bless Your name
Though You ruin me
Still I will worship
Sing a song to the One who's all I need

(Though You Slay Me by Shave & Shane)

We think back to Job and it was the devil who was the one who brought that affliction to Job. But it was God Who was the One was testing. The devil was the one who was bringing the affliction, yet God was in control the entire time. God knew when that affliction would end and He restored Job.

There's a similar theme here in Revelation that says, *"The devil is about to throw some of you into prison that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation."* Like some of the other places in Revelation, I don't think this was a literal ten days. But what He was saying to them was, "There's a set time here. This is not unending. There's a time when you are going to face tribulation and there will be an end in sight. It's not going to last forever." So He calls to them, and to us, *"Do not fear what you are about to suffer."* Do not fear what the devil is about to do to you. It will not last forever.

I think when we bring this into our current day and think of trials and suffering and persecution, we know that American Christians don't not face the same kind of persecution that most of the world does, or that Christians throughout history have. Many, many, many who have been in the minority have been oppressed and physically persecuted. We haven't really faced that.

Still, it's helpful for us to think how this applies to us today. Well, if we're called to be willing to suffer, we at least need to be willing to live for Him. Right? An argument from the greater to the lesser. Jesus said, *"Be faithful to unto death..."* (Revelation 2:10). Paul was able to say, *"For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain"* (Philippians 1:21). If throughout history thousands of Christians have been willing to die for Christ, should we not at least be willing to live for Him? Should we not at least be willing to say no to temptation? Can we not say, "I'm following Christ—this world has no grip on me"? Should we not at least be willing to endure a smirk from our neighbor or family member who just can't believe that we actually believe in God and Christ? Should we not at least be willing to be ridiculed or mocked? At least that?

But then, you don't have to talk long with Christians in America to hear that there are some who are worried about where our country is headed and what that means for our own

freedoms and our acceptance in this world. There are certainly some who are worried and fearful that normal Christians here could be oppressed and persecuted for our faith.

It doesn't seem to me like that's very near, but it could be, and we need to be willing and ready to follow what Christ has said: to not fear. To not fear what's coming. To not fear what we are about to suffer, but to be faithful to Him until death. To not fear what the devil may do to us through others. To not fear that we are about to be tested, knowing that that tribulation—whatever it is—only goes so long. It does not last. It's not eternal.

So first, Jesus knows our suffering. He knows our tribulation and He actually knows what's waiting for us. He knows future suffering. He knows future tribulation. He knows future trials. Then He calls us to fearless faithfulness until death.

Point three: Jesus promises the second death will not hurt us. If we've been redeemed, if we've trusted that Jesus died for our sins and rose again, if we're following Him and trusting in Him, what He's promised here is that if we persevere and are faithful we will not see or be hurt by the second death. See what He's done in this letter? The call is sitting right there in the middle: *"Be faithful until death..."* Don't fear what you're about to suffer, but be faithful to Him no matter the cost. That's sitting right in the center of this letter.

Right before that, He's encouraging us, saying, "I know. I know your trials. I know your tribulation." Then right after that, He's giving reasons. He's building up our hope and faith, saying, "This is why you can trust Me until death. This is why you can follow Me no matter the cost." And the first thing He says is, "You will not be hurt by the second death."

The end of the book of Revelation says there's coming a day when death and hell are cast into the lake of fire. God's judgment is coming. It says, *"This is the second death..."* (20:14). Hebrews 9:27 says, *"...[I]t is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment..."* There is coming a judgment. There is coming a second death. It's true. It's reality. But Jesus says here, "Be faithful unto death and you will not be hurt by the second death."

I'm going to be preaching the next two weeks as well. Going through some

At the end of each of these letters, there's a repeated theme that calls them to persevere, overcome and conquer. I want to dive deeper into that theme of perseverance in one of the other sermons over the next two weeks. But here in this passage, just trust and rest in this promise that those who are truly His—who truly have faith in Christ, who've truly been saved by Him—we will not see the second death. We can be faithful no matter what comes in this life because we know we are already rescued from that second death.

So Jesus knows your tribulation.

Jesus calls you to fearless faithfulness unto death.

Jesus promises that the second death will not hurt you.

This last point actually comes up in the first verse we looked at where we see that **Jesus is the first and last Who conquered death**. In each of these letters, Jesus describes Who is writing these messages, giving a description of Himself rooted in the way He was described back in Revelation 1. But in this letter specifically the way He wanted to describe Himself to this church—who was under tribulation, who was being persecuted and slandered, whom He’s calling to faithfulness to Him, calling them to hang on—He describes Himself this way. He says, *“These are the words of the first and the last, who died and came to life”* (Revelation 2:8).

This is our hope. This is why we can trust Him. This is why we can believe Him when He says we will not be hurt by the second death, because He is the first and the last, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. He is God of very Gods. He’s always existed and He always will. Then beyond that, He’s not only God of this entire universe, He died and came back to life. He conquered death. This is why we have hope that we too will rise, that we too will not be hurt by the second death.

I opened this message saying that I know there are some people whom I would die for. But what if it were someone I don’t know. What if it were an enemy? What if it were someone more difficult to die for? Look at Romans 5:7-8 where it talks about Jesus’ death for us. It says through death Jesus destroyed the one who has the power of death. Then it says this: *“For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*

While we were enemies of God, while we were at war with God, while we were living in our sin, rebelling and running from God, it was in that state that Christ died for us. He laid down His life that we might be free. He gave up His life that we may live, that we may not be hurt by the second death. But that’s not true of everyone. It’s not true, unless you’ve been saved by Him, unless He has redeemed you, unless you’re turning away from sin and say, “I trust. I believe that He died for me and rose again. I’m willing to follow Him. I’m willing to abandon everything else and trust only in Him.” And if you’ve done that, then what He promises is eternal life—eternal.

That’s why this temporary life, this finite life that we live now, we live for Him. We say, “I’m willing to abandon everything else. I’m willing to suffer any cost. I’m willing to face any threat. I’m willing to face any suffering. I’m willing to face any opposition. I’m willing to be thought a fool. I’m willing to be thought a bigot. Not because I’m obnoxious, not because I’m mean, but because I want to follow Christ.”

There will be times when we have to say that, when we have to stand for truth, speaking the truth in love, yet willing to count the cost, willing to suffer, willing even perhaps to die for Him. And it's worth it!

So here's the call to the church of Smyrna that we—New Covenant Bible Church—all need to hear. He knows our current suffering. He knows what we will suffer. He calls us not to fear that, but to faithfully follow Him until death, knowing that we will not be hurt by the second death and knowing that our hope rests in Him, in Jesus Who is the first and the last, Who has already conquered death.

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