

Trusting God for Life through Death
(Revelation #5, Church of Smyrna, 2:8-11)
9.29.24
(Rick Napolitano)

Good morning and Greetings in the name of Jesus.

Testimony: I've long been leery to teach from the book of Revelation, primarily because of the many symbolic references, and the difficulty of interpreting future events. It's just been easier to sidestep it than to find my way through. However, after some early reading and studying this summer, I have been enjoying the study together. Then I was assigned the section of scripture we have before us today, and I started to panic all over again.

Persecution is a vivid reminder that there are very real threats, and animosity occurring on a daily basis around the world to Christian believers. The gist of Rev 2:8-11 is very straightforward. Jesus, through John, wants to encourage steadfastness in the faith, even if the penalty is death. And while I fully concur with the theme, it can be more difficult in practice than in theory, difficult to comprehend how believers walk steadfastly through severe trials and tribulations. Sometimes I look at my faith and realize my strength is as lame as pushing a sailboat with my breath.

My exposure to personal persecution is very limited. None-the-less, the admonition from scripture is to present the whole counsel of God, so persecution is not a topic we should shy away from. Scripture is exceptionally clear, those who live godly lives will face persecution. God goes so far as to tell us in the sermon on the mount that persecution is actually a genuine blessing for us in the long term.

I've heard it said, and I think this is borne out by the parable of the Sower, and the seed, that we will walk earnestly with God in trials both in the valley, and in the mountain top.

The valley is the unpretentious walk through suffering, tribulation and persecution. Jesus conveys that many who start their walk on rocky ground, fade away. The rocky ground represents tribulation and persecution of the saints. Tribulation, which is a grinding distress, causes us to turn back in fear, and we fall away from trusting our savior. This is the test the church in Smyrna is facing.

On the opposite extreme, we have the Laodiceans. They had great riches and lived in comfort and ease. Yet we have one of the strongest reprimands in scripture addressed to them.” *you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.* Jesus comments, “*but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.* The Greek word for “cares” has a similar tone to “splintering anxiousness”. It’s just stress of a different kind. Being on the mountain top of a more care-free life, away from the extreme poverty and tribulation we find in scripture today, has its own challenges. Wealth can be a very toxic gift. And we need Christ in both scenarios.

The penetrating element that is missing from the rocky soil, and the weedy soil, but present with the “fruitful soil” is an ever-present trust in Christ. The encouragement in these 7 letters to the churches is to trust God, whether we have little or plenty.

It is noteworthy that the two churches facing extreme oppression and persecution, Smyrna and Philadelphia, are the only 2 churches that Christ does not correct. So, while we need Christ always, it is sometimes more readily apparent when we are in the valley.”

Our text today reminds us that we are to Trust God for life through death, and if we want to be fruitful, we must remain faithful, even unto death.”.

Let's pray together: Lord Help us understand the nature of life and death; help us understand the diabolical schemes of the enemy; lord help us understand what it means to trust you in all things: to fear not and to be faithful. -----

Context: We have covered the context of these letters previously. One highlight, the “angels” receiving these letters are likely to be pastors responsible to lead the churches. It heightens my awareness to sincerely pray for the welfare of leaders in general, but Scott in particular. He, and his family, are at the pointed end of the spear, and therefore bear huge weight and responsibility. Our prayers for their care are essential.

The letter we are addressing today is to the church in Smyrna, at a time of about 90 AD; roughly 60 years after the resurrection. The church appears to be a small, very poor church, in the midst of a prosperous city. The Greek term used here to describe their poverty, is one of two terms that

could be used: this one describes utter destitution, a complete lack of the basic necessities of life.

Smyrna also had a direct pastoral chain of bishops descending directly from the Apostles, the most famous being Polycarp, a disciple of John the human author of this letter. Polycarp was burned at the stake, and then stabbed because apparently his body would not catch fire. According to church historians, he is famously to have said at the ripe age of 86, "God has been faithful to me for all these years, how can I deny him now." His martyrdom was apparently one in a long chain before and after him in this city because of a steadfast faith, and unwillingness to confess anyone other than Christ as Lord.

One final contextual thought, it has been helpful for me to remember that these believers are people just like us. It was a different time and a different world, but they were believers just like us. Believers whose souls were in jars of clay. They faced difficult stresses, but their ultimate trust rested in God alone.

I try to think and imagine they are walking in the balanced mix of natural tensions of fear and anxiety, and supernatural hope and joy of the gospel. How am I going to continue to be faithful? I cannot feed my children, and the other families are suffering as well. What are we going to do? I do not know if I can keep up? And yet. A supernatural joy still exists of Christ providing life to the soul. Their example of Faith in Christ, and trust looking forward to a city whose builder and maker is God. Understanding these dynamics, and maintaining a faithful trust in God is the challenge facing these believers, and us today.

Let's read together from the scripture:

[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.'

PROP: "Trusting Christ brings faithful eternal fruit even in the face of death."

Lord willing, our intent is to cover this in 3 segments: Understanding scripture's view of life and death, understanding diabolic schemes:(the Synagogue of Satan); Understanding fearless faithfulness:

1. Understanding Scripture's View of Life and Death

[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.

We do not want to slip by the fact that these are the words of Jesus. "*faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.*" When the apostles were on the verge of being scattered, Peter turns to Jesus and says, "*where would we go, you alone have the words of eternal life*".

Christ's heart is to assure these people that he is aware of their situation, and to put courage in their souls by speaking to them.

It is the same with us today. It is the word of Christ that speaks to our soul and converts us from death to life. It is the words of Christ that birth the life of Christ in us. *He who is in you, is greater than he who is in the world.* It is the word of Jesus that brings faith, life and encouragement to the soul. It is the life of Christ that keeps us, and his life comes from his word.

While faith in God is not always the same in degree, some have more and some have less, faith is always the same in nature. When it roots, no matter how small it is, the life of Christ will produce fruit.

As a matter of course, it is important to Feed your children, friends, families and yourselves on the gracious words of Christ that they might produce faith for our situations. -----

Moving on, it is noteworthy that the terms life and death are used 5 times in these 4 short verses. Life and death are key themes of this letter, and scripture in general. Christ's declaration not only describes the eternal one speaking, but it frames the message to the church with two essential concepts; life and death.

A simple phrase captures the scripture's view of life and death well.

“If you are born once, you will die twice; If you are born twice, you will die once.”

There are 2 births, and 2 deaths presented to us all. When we are born, even as little babies we are created as body and soul. However, our spirit is dead to God. The result of the curse to Adam rests on each one of us. We are born physically alive, but spiritually dead, and separated from God's spirit. *“All have sinned, there is none righteous, no not one”*. We are born enemies of God. The curse of the wrath of God remains on us. That is the first birth.

When we die, the canister our souls live in, our body, withers away. The soul is eternal, but the body decays and is no more. *“Ashes to ashes, dust to dust”*. So, death separates the soul from the body. The soul continues to live on, just separate from a physical body. This is the first death.

The second birth is pronounced by God as an opportunity to rejoin the spirit of God from which we have been separated because of the curse. Nicodemus asked Christ how are we to be reawakened to the spirit of God? How is our relationship with God restored? Essentially, how are we to overcome the curse of the fall of man? And Jesus said to Nicodemus, *“You must be born again!”*

When we hear the word of Christ, and we repent and believe, our spirits are made new. Scripture tells us when we hear, receive, and understand the word of God, we are *“made alive in Christ”*. We are newly created. This is the second birth. Christ himself comes to live in us by his Holy spirit. We receive forgiveness for our sins, because of his death on the cross. The power of the resurrection births new life in us. We are one with God. We are reconciled, and we are at peace with God. This is the second birth. Now it is his mettle that lives in us, not just we ourselves.

The second death that Christ speaks of in verse 11 is more clearly outlined in Rev 20. It references the final judgment. It is a final commanding shout at the close of creation to anyone who refuses to have Christ pay for their sins. In the final judgment, those separated from God, and refusing to receive his kind mercies, those who died once, but never born twice, will be forever separated from his presence.

This death is described, most frequently by the author of life and death- Jesus himself, he who is the first and last, and knows all things, in terrifying details as relentless burning with unmet desires, eternal gnashing of teeth, unending crushing tribulation and a poverty of heart and mind that have no hope of ever being recovered.

If you are born once (a physical birth, but spiritually dead), you will die twice- your initial physical death, and a second death at the commencement into eternity in a spiritually dead state permanently separated from God forever.

However, if you are born twice (physical birth and a spiritual rebirth to be alive in Christ) then you will only suffer one death- (your physical separation of the soul and the body), but you will be restored in body and spirit with Christ for eternity. There is no second death for you!

And so, we move to our second point:

2. Understanding Diabolic Schemes of the Enemy: The Synagogue of Satan

[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...[10b] Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison..."

In this description, we see the severe turmoil of our Christian brethren in the Smyrna church. They are facing tribulation, deep poverty, and slanderous threats of prison and death.

As already noted, the term for tribulation carries with it a root action of crushing, like olives being squeezed in a compress, or the grinding of wheat laid between two heavy stones. It is a narrowing ever-closing restriction of life by circumstances. Rather than being in a broad spacious

place, we are in a very narrow suffocating tight place. We cannot move, sometimes we can barely breathe. We are being crushed, like an animal in the coils of a powerful constricting snake.

Tribulation can come from the destitution of poverty, and the inability to provide for our families. It can be the anxious hopelessness, and helplessness of being in the grip of forces that are stronger than we are. It can be the fear of debilitating disease. It can be the decay of aging that we cannot combat. It can be fears and anxiety that overwhelm us. It can be anything that grinds away at us and brings despair. Or, as in this case, it can be persecution that threatens our bodies and souls with pain of death to our very existence.

To our original hearers, this slanderous assault was apparently coming from Jews who were aligned with the Romans. There was hatred by the Jewish religious system toward Christ, and now it is extended to Christian believers. This 'Synagogue of Satan', led by the chief accuser of the brethren the devil himself, were aligned with the Romans and seeking to quell this group of converts with threats, death and slanderous accusations.

"Throughout history the sacred name of Religion has been too often prostituted to the most detestable purposes." -William Wilberforce

And so, it is with the Jewish synagogue in Smyrna. the Jews aligned with Rome to persecute Christians. -----

But there is another thought I would like to offer to that description for a broader application of the term Synagogue of Satan.

The initial curse brought with it two very serious dilemmas. The first was death, which we covered briefly. The second was a terrifying dominion of darkness.

While we were intended to rule the world under the kind care of the trinity, with our first sin we exchanged a pleasant environment for a new devious governor. A fearful slew of evil agents, led by the devil himself, were unleashed to bring a poisonous danger, and deceptive mistruths to rule our world.

In the words of Leon Morris, describing the sinful rebellion:

“The very bottomless pit has been opened in our midst so that heaven and earth have been darkened with the fumes and the whole atmosphere of the world has been poisoned.” – Leon Morris

As a result of the fall and its curse, we live as captives in a dark and dying world. A world with Crime, perversion, hatred, hostilities, and decay. A world where we breathe and perceive the sights and sounds of the poisonous vapor of an enemy tyrant, whose plan is to lie, kill and destroy. The evils and hurts of this world are evidence of his dominion of darkness. His tool is the fear of death, and we are enslaved, with no way of escape.

This world is a Synagogue, a “church” of its own. It is a collection of every person, or nation, or assailant aligned against us in Christ. The culture of this world is at war with Christ. The poisoned, darkened creatures of the world's polluted environment who rage at God, and claim their own independence from God are all citizens of the Synagogue of Satan; which by the way, we once were a part of!

The culture of this world, the followers of the prince of the air, the nations that rage in vain against the Lord. Any and all who think they know better than God. Or who believe they can live separate from God. All these are enemies of God and members of this satanic congregation.

There is a war between the people of God, and the armies of the enemy that is being fought every day. It's being fought in our hearts and minds, and in the practices of life in almost every choice we make. We see it manifest in different plains, but the source of stress is almost always the same. The pressure from this Synagogue of Satan is to make us fearful and fail to trust God, and abandon our relationship with God.

The message from the synagogue of Satan is this, “Don't swim against the tide of public opinion, or you will be crushed”. However, being with Jesus requires going against the flow. We're not of this world and shouldn't conform to it.”

As a result of the fall, we should not expect to live in a world that understands us, or welcomes our witness” (Morris p.131)

Which brings us to our third point:

3. Understanding Fearless Faithfulness

[10] Do not fear what you are about to suffer...Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.

This concept of fear is a dominant theme in scripture. One author found nearly 150 different references or commands to “Fear not”. Jesus speaks it here, Verse 10 - *Fear not what you are about to suffer*. From a natural perspective, there is reason to fear; Some of you are going to be put in prison, and some of you are going to die. This is serious stuff.

As Joshua takes over from Moses to lead the people into the promised land, he is commanded 3 times in the first 9 versus to “be strong and courageous; do not be afraid”. Verse 9: *“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”*

The word “Dismayed” means shattered; the command is “don't break apart”. Don't let the union you have with God be diminished. He is with you wherever you go.

Jairus is walking with Jesus. His child is on her deathbed. He has summoned up enough courage to approach Christ. Jesus has given him some hope by agreeing to go with him, Then the faith shattering news comes- Your daughter is already dead. Mt 5:36- Jesus quickly looks at him and says, *‘Don't be afraid, only believe.’* Matthew Henry tells us, “Faith is the only remedy against grief and fear at such a time.”

It's amazing that the command to not fear is most often given when there is reason to fear. Jesus is not insensitive to the plight we all suffer. He created us, he understands that fear is a natural emotion. Fear can be protective and alerts us to fight or flight in dangerous situations. However, fear can be debilitating. Our response may be fight, or flight - or faith in God! Jesus is telling us to Trust God especially in the most serious and severe situations. Christ is saying, *“Do not fear what you are about to suffer. [but] Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. Stay faithful to the course, and you will receive ultimate riches!*

Fear includes worry and anxiousness. Those are smaller trickles of fear that splinter us in our trust. Jesus taught us to examine our fear, worry, and anxiety as clues into who or what we worship.

Our money, health, reputation, and relationships are valuable to us, and we become anxious when what we love becomes threatened. Anxiety provides us a window into what our hearts genuinely treasure.

I have long fought with anxiety regarding Financial provision for my family. Worry and stress about losing my job, or failing health that might rob me of the ability to care for my family. To this day, in hindsight, I'm ashamed at how stressful I would sometimes get when I learned of a new corporate reorg, layoffs, or recessions, or other financial fears.

That extends to worry about how I will endure continuing Persecution; As I read of others, I am alarmed at their plight, and fear can creep in that I will fail when persecution arises.

But I am comforted by this thought from scripture; the early Macedonians, and the Thessalonians were very young new believers. And in the midst of their severe oppression and persecution, Christ kept them. They were faithful, because that same spirit that raised Christ from the dead was alive in them. It is Christ who keeps us, not we ourselves.

Christ does not want us to walk in these anxieties and fears. According to Hebrews, Jesus tasted death, so we could be free from the power of the one that threatens death, anxiety and worry. *Come unto me all you who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*

Ps 23 says we walk in the shadow of death. Death lurks around us and casts a shadow over our lives. It is the threat of harm, and this trickle of death can rain over us. It causes us to shake and quake, and grind under the impending fears. But the verse goes on to say, *"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me..."*

If we are born again, and trusting Christ for our salvation, then the mettle of our lives is *"Christ in us, the hope of Glory"*. He will, by his spirit, ensure that we will conquer and receive the victor's crown.

The parable of the talents helps me when I get fearful. I'm reminded that two servants were fruitful, because they worked faithfully and invested wisely. But the third man failed because of his fear. *.25 so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground.*

Fear causes us to shrink back, but faithfulness is holding dear to Christ. *Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.*

With faithfulness, which has an element of responsibility to cling and to pursue, there is also an element of trust. Scottish minister Alexander Maclaren put it,

“Faith, which is trust, and fear are opposite poles. If a man has the one, he can scarcely have the other in vigorous operation. He that has his trust set upon God does not need to dread anything except the weakening or the paralyzing of that trust”.

Proverbs 3 reminds us- *Don't let steadfast love and faithfulness, the very character and qualities of God's self-proclamation of who he is, forsake you; Don't let go, because he is not going to let go of you. ...5 Trust in the Lord with all your heart.*

Proverbs reminds us, GOD is the source of steadfast love and faithfulness” Don't let go of that. In order to be faithful, remember that He is faithful.

He has already shown, once and for all, and he repeats it here, *I am he that liveth and was dead.* The Cross the highest exhibition of steadfast love and faithfulness. Christ left the comforts of heaven and the fellowship with the Father and spirit to come to earth to rescue us. He saw that we were dead and in the dominion of the evil one. And he laid down his own life to give us new life and rescue us from second death.

He has given us his word, *will never leave us or forsake us.* We will face hardship, toil and tribulation in this age, but in the age to come you will have unspeakable riches and pleasures forevermore. *You are rich-* richer than we can ever imagine- in care, in relationships, in spiritual and bodily life for all eternity.

Trust him in all your ways. I like to remind myself from scripture that when I am fearful, trust him, because he has shown me over and over, he can be trusted.

Conclusion

David, a man after God's own heart, encourages us in Psalm 56 when being attacked and trampled on by his oppressor, *When I am afraid, I put*

my trust in you. ...This I know that God is for me. ...What can man do to me? ...13 For you have delivered my soul from death..., that I may walk before God in the light of life.

Perhaps you are facing financial stress, show you are trusting God by honoring him from your wealth and give. See if he does not show himself strong.

Maybe like some others in our service today, you have received a scary medical prognosis. Fear of a retracted living, life threatening concerns are gripping your heart. Please talk with others who have been through it and let them counsel you to trust God in all things.

It may be that relational breakdowns of threatening divorce, neighbors, family quarrels, or even an unsettled question of your relationship with God are squeezing you through hurtful and painful places. Find practical help by talking to others with counsel that at the root takes you to a comforting place of resting in God for help.

It is amazing that as I look back on life the most frequently answered prayers in my life have been when I've prayed, "Lord please help me".

And for us all, as the pressures of persecution take on a new light -even in this 'land of the free and home of the brave' work diligently to "*seek me while I may be found*". As it has been said, "Dwellers in lands of snow and ice soon grow cold, and so may it be with us by living far from God and the Sun of Righteousness." Draw close to Christ now, that he may be more readily apparent to help us in the face of death.

As the worship team returns, let us pray! May the life and grace of God be in our souls that ye might walk fearlessly and faithfully trusting you for all things in this life and the life to come.

(PRAY)