

Revelation 2: 8-11; "Do not be afraid, be Faithful," Sermon # 16
in the series - "The Faithful and True Witness," Delivered by
Pastor Paul Rendall on May 14th, 2006 , in the Afternoon
Worship, and again on July 24th, 2011.

The letters to the 7 churches of Asia in the book of the Revelation are given by Christ, not only to speak to them about the state of their individual churches, but they were also given to speak to churches all down through the Church age until our Lord returns. This book is applicable to all churches and all individual Christians in all generations because the realities of what was taking place in these 7 churches are the realities of what may exist in any church, at any time, in any generation until the Lord returns. Christians and churches of Christians are expected to be faithful to the Lord Jesus no matter whether things are going pleasantly with them or whether they are being persecuted and struggling with fears. The Lord Jesus is saying in these verses to this church and also to our church, "Do not be afraid; be faithful." It is an integral part of our witness to Jesus Christ to learn to overcome our fears so that we can prove the sufficiency of the grace of Christ and show forth the truth and the strength of His grace to others. This can only be done by remembering that the Lord Jesus knows what our fears are, and He is with us to overcome them. So we must ask the question this afternoon, "What are the fears of the church at Smyrna that the Lord Jesus encourages them to overcome?" And we can see, if we will gaze upon the text, that the fears of the church of Smyrna were related to things that they must endure and suffer under for a time, and for being faithful to do this, the Lord would give them the crown of life. The fears which they had, and which we might have as well, are poverty, persecution, and the Devil's schemes. We will think about the first two this afternoon, and the third the next time that we are together. What were the fears of this church at Smyrna, and how does the Lord Jesus encourage them to overcome these fears?

1st of all- The Lord Jesus encourages them to overcome the fear of Poverty.

He declares to the church in Smyrna that He is "the First and the Last, who was dead, and had come to life." I believe that He means that He is First in the sense that He as their great Savior and Lord and King had been First in everything related to their faith; He had gone before them in everything to pave the way. He was the One who was righteous and pursued righteousness before the church at Smyrna was ever formed. He was the One who suffered for the sake of righteousness before they even began to think of it, and they could not have come to know God if He had not done so. He was the One who suffered and died, having faced the

opposition and the cruel hatred of some of the Jews of that day before they had ever realized where their faith in Christ would lead them. He was "the First" to them in that He had gone before them. He knows what it is like, and what it will involve and where it will lead. And He would be "the Last" in relation to their faith as well. That is, that He having begun a work in them would continue to work in their hearts and lives until the work was completed, until the Day that He returned. He is the author and the finisher of their faith and ours as well. And they, and we also, need to remember this when we come into situations which cause us to fear. They must have been afraid of what was coming upon them because otherwise the Lord would not have told them, "Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer." They had evidently worked at being pleasing to the Lord by trying to keep His commandments, but in the process of their being faithful in doctrine and practice they had met with great opposition to their faith in Christ; so much so, that it is called "tribulation" in verse 9. I am told that they were not poor to begin with, but that they became poor because of their persecution. It was not unusual in that day for Christians to be hated and mistreated, to have their earthly goods confiscated, and to be ostracized for their faith. It was their faithfulness that had led them to their poverty, not a lack of diligence. And it was this that had caused them to fear. And the Lord Jesus, to encourage them on in the right direction, says that "He knows." When He says this, He is not simply making an observation to them declaring His Omniscience. He is saying this as their friend and the helper of their faith. He says to them, "But you are rich." He is bringing this statement to them as an encouragement so that they would not be afraid of this kind of poverty. It was suffering the loss of their earthly wealth and possessions that showed the Lord Jesus what they considered more important and most important of all, to them. It was doing His will and keeping His commandments. You will find as you read the New Testament that this is where obedience often led those who were faithful.

Turn with me to Hebrews, Chapter 10. In verses 32-34 we find the apostolic writer saying this: "But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings: partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations, and partly while you became companions of those who were so treated; for you had compassion on me in my chains, and joyfully accepted the seizure of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven. Therefore do not cast away your confidence which has great reward." The apostle Paul is here acknowledging that there is a great inner conflict that goes on in the soul of a Christian who knows that he will perhaps suffer poverty if he takes an open stand for the Lord Jesus

Christ and the keeping of His commandments, His blessed Word. Fear can enter in because earthly comforts are in danger of being lost. Earthly possessions are in danger of being lost. It appears that it was because these believers had not only identified with Christ openly; saying that they had faith in Him, and thus had become a public spectacle by reproaches and tribulations; but they also shown compassion to Paul in his chains and had their goods confiscated as well for trying to help and encourage him. Jesus is saying that they had treasure in heaven. All of these works are noticed and rewarded by Him.

Listen to James 1: 9 in this regard. "Let the lowly brother (the brother of humble circumstances) glory in his exaltation, (His high position) "but the rich in his humiliation, because as a flower of the field he will pass away." "For no sooner has the sun risen with a burning heat than it withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beautiful appearance perishes. So the rich man also will fade away in his pursuits." You can see here that God's view of a man having earthly riches is exactly the opposite of what the world's view is. It is an exaltation, a high position, for the believer who has come to poverty as a result of taking his stand for righteousness and truth. It is a humiliation for a man in the sight of God to pursue only the glory and enjoyment of earthly things without God; not realizing how fleeting they are, and how lost he will be when he dies. You can see how displeased God really is with people who try to make distinctions in the church of how important a man is by whether he is rich or poor by the verses in chapter 2 of James. "My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality." "For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, and you pay attention to the one wearing fine clothes and say to him, 'You sit here in a good place.' And say to the poor man, 'You stand there,' or 'Sit here at my footstool.'" "Have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?" "Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he promised to those who love Him?" That is what Jesus means in our text when He says to those at Smyrna, "You are rich."

This is why we should not fear. God is going to take special care of His persecuted poverty stricken people. He will either find ways to sustain them in their poverty or take them home to be with Him in heaven. I think of Moses in the Old Testament. In the book of Hebrews, Chapter 11, verse 24 and following says, "By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he

looked to the reward." This again is what it means to be rich in God's eyes; to be reproached for Christ. We are so ingrained with the idea in this society and culture that to have money is to have all and every advantage, that we forget God's view of things. Our fears should be assuaged and banished when we realize that Jesus knows our poverty and will give special grace and help to those who suffer for doing what is right on His account.

Then 2ndly- The Lord Jesus would encourage them to overcome the fear of being persecuted by religious men. (Verse 9b)

He says, "I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan." It must have been very disturbing and discouraging to the saints of the church of Smyrna to undergo the kind of persecution that they were going through, because it was coming from the local Jewish synagogue. It may have been that there were many persons in the church at Smyrna who were Jews by birth who had heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. They believed and had been saved, and they were now attending the church there in Smyrna. And they were being reproached for the sake of Christ by the ultra-religious Jewish leaders and people of the synagogue that they used to attend. They were probably being told that since they had believed in Jesus that they were no longer true Jews, that Jesus was not a person or a prophet to be believed and trusted. They were probably accused of forsaking the God of their fathers, and the covenant nation of Israel with all her ordinances; circumcision and Passover especially. They probably said cruel things about Jesus being under a curse because He misled the people and He died on a tree, and then concluded by saying that there was no real hope for these believers in the church at Smyrna unless they came back to the synagogue again. But our Lord, here in these verses reverses the analysis that these persecutors had given to his people in the church at Smyrna. He says, "I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan." He is saying what the Apostle Paul is saying in Romans 2: 28, "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 of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God." These men who were reproaching and persecuting the church at Smyrna were not the true Jews, but "a synagogue of Satan," Jesus is saying.

You and I who have come to understand that we must have Christ in order to have our hearts circumcised and come to know God, should know by way of application from this text, that there are many churches of people in our day that think that they worship God in truth. But if they reject Jesus Christ by setting up a salvation by sacramental ordinances and ceremonies which by the performance of them, somehow is supposed to bring salvation to them without faith in the gospel of what Christ has done

by His blood and righteousness, then it cannot be the case that they shall be saved. And their churches and their synagogues, when they speak against the Lord Jesus as being the only way of salvation, because of some supposed deficiency in Him, are really blaspheming. Jesus says, "Do not fear any of the things that you are about to suffer."

This is what really happened to Polycarp, who was a man who was a pupil of the Apostle John, and became the pastor of the church of Smyrna. J. Newton Brown's Encyclopedia says of him, "He was, for more than 80 years, pastor of the church of Smyrna; to which he appears to have been recommended by the Apostle John. According to Archbishop Ussher, the Apostle John directed one of the seven apostolical epistles to Polycarp, under the title of "the Angel of the church of Smyrna". In the year 166 A.D. persecution grew violent in the city, and a general outcry was raised for the blood of Polycarp. When he was finally found and taken he said, 'The Lord's will be done.' He surrendered to them with a cheerful countenance, and invited them to refresh themselves at his table, only asking on his own behalf, one hour for prayer. His request was granted, and his devotions were prolonged to double that period, with such sweetness and fervor that all who heard him were struck with admiration and the soldiers repented of their errand. Having ended his prayer, he was set upon a donkey and conveyed to the place of judgment. He was met on the way by some of the magistrates, who took him into their carriage, and tried to persuade him to abjure his profession; but he was unyielding. On his approaching the place of execution, the proconsul, ashamed of putting to death so aged and venerable a man, urged him to blaspheme Christ. It was then that he answered, 'Eighty six years have I served him, during which time he never did me injury; how then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior? When further urged to blaspheme; his answer was, 'I am a Christian!' When threatened with wild beasts, he said, 'Bring them forth.' When threatened with fire, he reminded them of the eternal fire that awaited the ungodly. His last address to God had more of praise in it than of prayer." Polycarp was a man who overcame his fear of his persecutors and it was by remembering what the Lord Jesus had done for him and what He meant to Him. Christ was more precious by far, to him, than his life. He could have run away and escaped when they first came to get him, but he welcomed the men who came to take him. He overcame his fears by meditating on the glory of what it would mean to be with Christ when he had overcome. The Lord Himself came to him to help him to overcome with special grace. May the Lord give us this same kind of grace if we are called upon to suffer for Him.