

The Rich Church  
Revelation 2:8-11  
10/26/2014

Malcolm Muggeridge, the famous British pundit, once said this: “Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my 75 years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my experience, has been through affliction and not through happiness.” What Muggeridge is getting at is that pain and suffering is usually viewed as an obstacle to our faith. It gets in the way. Instead, he found that the painful experiences of life were the ones that taught him the most. They were the biggest asset in his life. It is very easy to say that we are poor when we have these experiences. Our text today says something very different. We may be physically poor, but these experiences of suffering and trial are things that God uses to make us spiritually rich. To understand this message, we need to go back in history.

Whenever the Roman empire conquered a new territory, they would typically let the conquered people continue to practice their own religious beliefs. However, they did not allow new religions to appear, since many new religions were invented simply to encourage rebellion against the Roman empire. So, when the Roman empire conquered the land of Judea, the Jewish religion was safe. But here is the rub: was Christianity considered to be the same thing as Judaism, or was it different? Obviously, Jews and Christians knew that they were different, but the Roman empire did not know it at first. So at first, Christians were allowed to practice their religion, since it looked outwardly very similar to Judaism. The first Christians were Jews, and that made a difference as well. However, towards the end of the first century, it became much clearer that Christianity was not the same thing as Judaism. The Jews themselves were making this case to the Roman authorities. It became a very convenient way to get Christians out of the way. All they had to do was go to the local Roman authority, and denounce the Christians, saying that they were practicing a new religion, one that encouraged rebellions, since they claimed that Jesus was lord, and not Caesar. The Roman authorities soon started to persecute the Christians. We

know from early Christian history that Jewish opposition to Christianity was particularly fierce in the city of Smyrna. It is important to realize that not all Jews in all cities were denouncing Christians. This passage gives us no justification for hating Jews. However, the Jews in Smyrna really did hate the Christians. They denounced the Christians to the Roman authorities, and the Roman authorities, in turn, were persecuting the Christians in the city.

What Jesus thinks about this situation is evident in verse 9: such people are only claiming to be Jews, but they are in reality the synagogue of Satan. As Paul would say, he is a true Jew who is one inwardly, not outwardly. Inwardly true Jews are those who recognize the true Messiah, and put their faith in Him. That means that Christians are the true Jews. Galatians 6 puts it this way: we are the true Israel of God. God does not count our ancestry in determining who are His true people. No one ever gets to heaven because their parents are Christians. God does not have grandchildren; only children! And we are the children of God through faith alone, in Christ alone, by grace alone, to the glory of God alone, and told to us in Scripture alone.

There is one other aspect of the history of Smyrna that might be relevant. The city itself had been destroyed at least once in its history, but had been rebuilt. The city had had a death and resurrection experience, if you will. The people at Smyrna were familiar with the legend of the phoenix, the bird that dies and then comes to life again. They connected that legend with their own history. That would give the Christians at Smyrna an extra layer of meaning when Jesus says to them that He is the first and the last, and that He died and came to life again. He has done better than the city of Smyrna. He not only died and lived again Himself, but He also has complete control over all death and life! There is no greater encouragement possible to those under persecution, those facing martyrdom for the faith, than to know that Jesus holds the power of life and death in His hands. There is nothing that the persecutors can do that will take them out of Jesus' hands. Truly, Paul spoke rightly when he said that not even death or life can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus.

Not only does Jesus have the power of physical death and life in His hands, but He also has the power of spiritual death and life in His hands. This is the importance of verse 11. The first death is the death of the soul. The second death is the eternal death that unbelievers will experience when

their bodies are raised from the dead and re-united with their souls, only to suffer an eternity of punishment. Jesus has control over that. He will not let that second death happen to any martyr of the Christian faith. The Greek here is very emphatic. The one who conquers will by no means be hurt by the second death. The idea here is to imagine for a second that the conqueror could possibly be hurt by the second death, and then erase even that thought from your mind. Perish even the thought that the conqueror could be hurt by the second death!

One of the things this teaches us is that we cannot be fooled by appearances. The one who is faithful even to death is the conqueror! Of course, this is true in a pre-eminent way of our Lord Jesus Christ. To all outward appearances, it looked as if death had conquered Jesus. There He was in the grave for three days, having given up His soul. He hadn't even lasted very long on the cross! And yet, on the third day, He was raised from the dead. Do not, therefore be fooled by appearances. The world will say that the martyr is a fool, and is someone who is defeated. Our Lord Jesus says that the very opposite is the case. The question is not whether the Christian dies or not, but whether he has been faithful even unto death. That is the mark of the conqueror: faithfulness. Do not be fooled by appearances. Do not be fooled by the world into thinking that a Christian martyr is defeated. Do not be fooled by the world into thinking that the physically poor Christian is also spiritually poor. God does not look on outward appearances, but rather looks on the heart. This doesn't mean that all physically poor Christians are spiritually rich. We do not get to heaven by being poor, any more than we get to heaven by being rich. What matters is faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, for only there can we have spiritual riches. What is important is being spiritually rich. We only become spiritually rich by trusting in the One who for our sakes became poor.

The best example of what this letter is talking about is undoubtedly the martyrdom of the pastor of Smyrna, whose name was Polycarp. Now, Polycarp knew the apostle John, according to the early church historian Eusebius. Polycarp was born around the year 70 A.D. We do not know when he became the pastor of the church at Smyrna, but he was the pastor of that church for a very long time, and he was a faithful pastor. He was denounced to the Roman authorities, possibly by the Jews. He was arrested, and was brought to the stadium by a police chief named Herod. They commanded

Polycarp to swear by the name of Caesar. His reply was, “For 86 years I have served Christ, and He has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my king who saved me?” He was then burned at the stake. An 86 year old martyr! He was the pastor of the church at Smyrna. He was faithful unto death, and so he received the crown of life from the hand of his savior.

Another important lesson that this passage teaches us is that persecution is short. There will always be an end to it, even if that end is martyrdom. Jesus tells the church that they will have tribulation for 10 days. This is the same length of time that Daniel and his friends were tested for when they ate only vegetables. There is quite possibly an echo here of Daniel 1. The test was really about whether Daniel and his friends would compromise with the Babylonian culture, or whether they would retain their identity as the people of God. The point is that the test does not last forever. It never does. That is one of the key reasons why Paul can say that the suffering of this life is not even worthy to be compared with the glory that is coming. You can put all the suffering, all the martyrdoms, all the slander, all the beatings, all the ridicule of the world against all Christians everywhere and for all time on one half of the balance scale, and you can put the glory that will be revealed (even to just one Christian!) in the other half of the balance scale, and there is no comparison: the glory is far greater. One reason for that is a very simple reason: the glory is eternal, whereas the suffering is temporary. That is not to say that suffering is nothing at all, or that it doesn't hurt. But it is like the pain of a woman in labor giving birth to a child. She knows that the pain is often severe. But she also knows that there is an end to that pain, and the result is a baby. The joy she has in seeing her newborn is so much greater than the pain of the birth. It is a fitting analogy to the entire world groaning in the pain of childbirth, as Paul says in Romans 8, waiting for the redemption that is coming.

The main thing I want us to take away from all this is a completely different view of pain, suffering, and martyrdom than we usually have. American Christians have a completely incorrect scale. We do not view this stuff in the correct way. We think we are entitled to consideration by everyone. We think we deserve politeness from non-Christians. Our entitlement mentality seems to have no boundaries. We are horrified if a Christian is sued by a homosexual because he will not make a cake to celebrate a “same-sex union.” We are horrified if pastors' sermons are

subpoenaed by a mayor of a large city. We are horrified when our beliefs are labeled “hate speech.” Friends, we need a completely different scale of reference for suffering for the truth. Our text is telling us that even facing death for our faith is not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed. The problem we have here is that we compare our suffering with the wrong thing. We are comparing our suffering to our comfortable life before the suffering occurs. That is not the biblical comparison. What we need to do is compare our suffering with the glory that is coming. When we do that, all suffering is as nothing. What we need to do is imagine the absolute worst case scenario, which is martyrdom, of course, and realize that God has already prepared His people for that.

We are often worried about whether we would have the strength to confess Christ's name in the face of death. It is always appropriate to pray to the Lord that if we ever face that scenario, God will give us the strength to confess his name. God gives strength to those who ask for it. There are countless examples of this in the history of martyrs. What is almost universally true is that God gives us that strength at the time when we need it. This is so that we will not depend on our own strength of mind, but rather depend entirely on Him.

The story of the second-century martyr Blandina proves this very well. Blandina was a Christian woman who was not physically strong. Her companions were afraid that she would not stay true to the Christian faith. But God gave her strength in the time of trial. She was tortured by Roman soldiers in every way possible. It was so intense that the soldiers themselves were worn out, and could not do anything more to her. Still she remained steadfast. She was then bound to the stake and wild beasts were let loose. Still she remained steadfast. Finally, she was whipped, roasted on a red-hot grill and thrown on to a steer, which tossed her up in the air. She still remained steadfast. Finally, she was killed with a dagger. But in all that time, she remained steadfast. She kept her eyes on her Savior the whole time, and never denied her Lord Jesus. I am convinced that the Lord works in those situations to help the Christian to bear up under it. The key here again is to compare our suffering with the glory of what is coming. This will allow us to rejoice for being counted worthy of suffering for the name of Jesus Christ. So not only do we need a completely different frame of reference for suffering, but we need to compare suffering to what is coming, not what we

now have. As Martin Luther said, “Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also; the body they may kill: God's truth abideth still; His kingdom is forever.”