

## 06. Smyrna: Weathering Life's Storms

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*Letters from Jesus*

By Robert Rohlin

**Bible Text:** Revelation 2:8-11

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That's always an inspiring video clip from "Facing the Giants," one of those movies that, I guess, always tugs at my heart a little bit.

We're going to look at a letter to a church that is unusual in the respect that out of seven churches, only twice did Jesus not give a word of rebuke. He only gave encouragement and such is the case with the church at Smyrna. We're going to look at some very special truths about suffering today and what it's like. I'll tell you how that video clip relates to it momentarily. Would you stand with me in honor of God's word as we read Revelation 2, beginning at verse 8 and ending at verse 11.

8 And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive; 9 I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan. 10 Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life. 11 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.

Let's pray.

*Father, we thank you today for the fact that you like a coach are encouraging us not to quit, not to give up, to keep moving against what seems like an impossible struggle so that we can reach the finish line of faithfulness for your glory. Father, grant us the grace to do that and now grant us open ears and an open heart to be able to hear what you have to say to each of us in our respective situations. We love you and pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.*

Thank you, you may be seated.

There are mainly two parts to this very simple passage and the first is that of an enduring church. Again, only this church and the church at Philadelphia receive no words of criticism, no words of critique, no words of condemnation from the Savior and so it is an enduring church. It's already suffering at the time that Jesus dictates this letter to them and yet more sufferings are on the way and yet in spite of all this, you could call this the rich poor church. They were poor in material goods but they were rich in spiritual goods. By the way, there is a principle here. I seem to see parenting principles wherever I'm at in Scripture, they just kind of leap off the page to me, but I think it's significant that even though in the letters to the seven churches Christ is primarily handing out words of discipline and chastisement to the churches, that occasionally he comes to a church that he just gives a word of encouragement to.

A number of years ago, I was in Washington DC. I was at the Dulles Airport preparing to fly back to Dallas and that week had been, I guess, a rough week for Judy at the home. Some of my children that week, I guess, they were younger then and they had maybe been a little more not so sweet to each other, let's just put it that way, and so I would talk to Judy on the phone and she'd say, "Would you talk to," and she would name the child and she said, "They have done such and such," and so, you know, it's kind of like daddy's not home but boy when he gets on the phone, you are in some serious trouble. So she got me on the phone and I would have to talk to the child. Of course, my frustration level was probably higher than my wife's struggling with situations and then I'm in another city and I can't do a whole lot about it. So I would express to them the fact that I was displeased with the attitude or the behavior and I don't even remember which children it was that week, it was more than one. Then I would kind of let them know, you know, what their chastisement was going to be and I would say, "Put your mother back on the phone so that I can tell her what the corrective steps are here." Or I would utter those words that you never want to hear daddy say, "Just wait till I get home."

I don't want my homecoming to be like that but anyway, I had a few of those conversations that week and then I'm standing in the Dulles Airport about to get on and they've already started loading passengers and, of course, they have to let the first class people on and then they let the military on as it should be. Then it's all the people with world Ruby standing and then they have the people that have, you know, the advantage of different things, there is the platinum first have to get on and then the gold and everything else. Now, they always say that you're in boarding group number one but boarding group number one is really like boarding group number five by the time it gets round to it, so it's false advertising. But anyway, so I'm sitting for a long time but I'm listening, not meaning to but, you know, you overhear things and there is a dad that is on the phone to his daughter. His daughter was in Austin, Texas. I picked all this up from the context of the one end of the conversation I could hear. He started out by saying, "Hello," sounded fairly cordial and then he starts letting her know that she's got to get her act together, that her grades in college weren't that good. So now my boarding group is finally called and I come and sit down on the plane and I'm getting settled and the guy comes in and he's like two rows behind me but, you know, close enough that I could still hear his conversation. He basically let her know that daddy was going to quit paying tuition if she didn't start spending a little less time partying and a little more time

studying. He let her know firmly, we'll just say firmly. The thought suddenly dawned on my brain that every time that week that I had talked to my kids it was for the purpose of handing out chastisement over the phone. Long distance chastisement and I thought, "God, please don't let me be the dad who the only time I open my mouth to my kids is to hand out criticism and to hand out critique." You see, your kids need to hear words of commendation. They need to hear words of encouragement and that needs to be a part of our daily communication so don't wait until the kids are messing up to talk to them. They say the average father in America talks 37 seconds a day to their child. That's pretty pathetic. But instead, take time to verbally encourage them. Let them know when they are doing a good job. Let them know how proud you are of them. Give them those words of affirmation. It means the world to them.

And Jesus gives some words of affirmation to the church in Smyrna. Now, Smyrna was a large and wealthy city. By and large it was 35 miles north of Ephesus which we visited in the last two sermons. Like Ephesus, it was a seaport. Ephesus no longer has a seaport today but Smyrna is still a seaport city to this day and still has a large population. Now, interestingly enough, the name "Smyrna" means "myrrh." It comes from a root word though meaning "bitter." Do you remember when in the Old Testament that the children of Israel get to a place called Marah and they tried to drink the water and the water was bad and they called it Marah because Marah meant bitterness. Well, "Marah" is the root word of the word "myrrh." That's where it comes from in the Hebrew. So there was this bitter water that was there and, of course, you remember Moses cast in basically a tree and the water became sweet and there is a whole another picture for another whole sermon there. But the word Marah means bitterness and we even have in the New Testament the name "Mary" can mean "bitter" and yet a person with that name doesn't have to be bitter. They can show how the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is sufficient to bring sweetness out of their bitterness just like the tree did at the waters of Marah.

And so it means bitter but just the name itself means myrrh. And myrrh was a perfume that was used in the tabernacle. In Exodus 30:23 it says, "Take thou also unto thee principal spices, of pure myrrh five hundred shekels, and of sweet cinnamon half so much, even two hundred and fifty shekels, and of sweet calamus two hundred and fifty shekels," and they made a perfume out of this and this perfume could not be used for anything else except worship in the temple. Then in Psalm 45:8, the Psalmist says, "All thy garments smell of myrrh, and aloes, and cassia, out of the ivory palaces, whereby they have made thee glad." So myrrh was used sometimes just as a part of perfume. Of course, in Matthew 2:11, we know that the wise men brought to, not the stable, they didn't show up at the stable, another sermon again, they showed up at a house when Jesus was a toddler and they brought him gifts: gold, frankincense and what? Myrrh as a perfume. In Mark 15:23, I don't know if you remember this but you may remember that when Jesus was hanging on the cross, that he dipped a sponge in a mixture and put it on a spike to wet his lips because he said, "I thirst," and of course, you read in one place maybe that it was water and vinegar but Mark 15:23 says, "And they gave him to drink wine mingled with myrrh: but he received it not." So it was the idea that he it was going to be bitterness that he would be drinking. Of course then in John 19:39 when Nicodemus came to claim the body of Jesus, he brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about 100

weight. So there is a significance to the name here because the Smyranean Christians are suffering some bitter circumstances in life. It's a wealthy city but because of their faith, they have been rejected. They are being deprived economically. It's hard for them to do business in society and the persecution is beginning and it's becoming worse and worse every day. Yet like myrrh, how they behave in their bitterness causes a sweet perfume to rise up to God. It's their faithfulness that makes for a sweet smell to God.

Now, our Savior knows something of suffering. Notice what he says when he introduces himself to the church at Smyrna. He says, "These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive." So he's the first. He's the author. He's also the finisher which means that between the start and the end, he's in control of every single situation. He is also the reason for everything and he's the goal for everything. He's the reason for life and Christ likeness is the goal for life. He is the priority in life but he's also the promise in life. Not only is he what we should put first in life but he is the very reward that we get for this life.

Then he says, "which was dead." Now, the ultimate suffering was what Jesus suffered going to the cross on Calvary. He's encouraging the Smyranean Christians, he says, "You know, suffering is bad. Suffering might lead to death but guess what? I was dead and I am alive." So there is something after the suffering. There is something after imprisonment. There is something after death. There's the resurrection and Jesus pioneered that for us. By the way, did you notice and I appreciate the songs my son picked. Did you notice verse 1 of hymn number 28, "Look Ye Saints the Sight is Glorious." Listen to those words in case you didn't really pay attention to them when you sang them.

"Look, ye saints! the sight is glorious:  
See the Man of Sorrows now;  
From the fight returned victorious,  
Every knee to Him shall bow."

He's never coming back as a suffering Savior again. He is the conqueror. He is the glorified and risen Lord so just the very way he introduces himself is meant to encourage the church at Smyrna.

Now, Smyrna knew about suffering. He says, "I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, but thou art rich and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan." The word he uses here for "tribulation" means "a continuing state of affliction." It wasn't just one problem and if they got over that hurdle, everything would be fine. It's kind of like they're living in a state of affliction. You know, sometimes I tell people that I don't live in the state of Texas, I live in the state of confusion. I bet the Smyrneans could have said that they didn't live in Smyrna, they lived in a state of affliction. And so they had that.

Then they had poverty. It's an interesting Greek word here that comes from the Greek word "ptosis" which means "a drooping of the eyelids." We'll talk more about that in just

a minute but it's an extreme poverty. The kind of poverty that you couldn't hold your head up high. The kind of poverty that made you ashamed that you had to live in such terrible conditions and yet it's interesting that Jesus makes a parenthetical statement. He says, "I know your poverty" and then in parentheses he says, "but thou art rich." You see, that's quite a contrast to the church in Laodicea because he's saying to the Smyranean Christians, "You are a rich poor church," and then he turns around to the Laodiceans in the next letter and he's going to tell them, "You are a poor rich church," because they said, "Look, we're increased with goods. We have need of nothing," and he says, "But you know not that you are wretched, poor, miserable, blind and naked." You see, there is quite a contrast.

In James 2:5, the Bible talks a lot about the poor. James 2:5, "Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him?" Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:26, says, "For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called." In other words, not a lot of rich people will make it into the kingdom of heaven. Jesus said that himself, "It's harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle." Well, you can put a camel through the eye of a needle as long as you run the camel through a Vitamix first, you know, but it's tough. It's tough. 2 Corinthians 6:10, Paul says about Christians, he says, "As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things." Now, Matthew 5:3 uses another interesting word. He says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Now look at this passage in 2 Corinthians, by the way, because I think it deserves another moment of attention. Paul is trying to tell us how to be approved of God when things are not going well. Look what he says, "but in all things approving ourselves as the ministers of God," and here's what you need to be an approved minister of God, he says, "in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, In stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in watchings, in fastings; By pureness, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Ghost, by love unfeigned, By the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armour of righteousness on the right hand and on the left, By honour and dishonour, by evil report and good report: as deceivers, and yet true." In other words, he says, the world may regard you as deceivers but be true, "As unknown, and yet well known," they may not know who you are but they'll hear of your faithfulness, "as dying, and, behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed; As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things." An amazing set of contrast; an amazing bit of writing. By the way, is poverty ever a good thing? Personally, I have an allergy to poverty. I don't really like that feeling and yet I certainly have experienced it over the years. You know, there have been times Judy and I didn't have two nickels to rub together and yet it can be a good thing. Why? Because it can drive people to God. It's times when we really need that can drive people to God.

There were two reasons that Christians in this day and time certainly would have been driven to God. One was the poverty of the Christians in Smyrna was caused a great deal by those who afflicted them. It was caused by those who said they were Jews but were not. We'll talk about what that means in a minute. In other words, it was religious people afflicting them. By the way, throughout history, the worst of the persecutors have been religious people. So they were afflicting them and so these people would cry out to God asking for deliverance and justice. The other thing is that when you are poor, sometimes you don't have any other resource but to cry out to God to solve your problem. Psalm 10:14 says, "Thou hast seen it; for thou beholdest mischief and spite, to requite it with thy hand: The poor committed himself unto thee; Thou art the helper of the fatherless." He says, "We're crying to you. We're trusting in you to solve this injustice." Psalm 12:5, "For the oppression of the poor, for the sighing of the needy, Now will I arise, saith the Lord; I will set him in safety from him that puffeth at him." You see, God takes an interest in the poor and the poor should take one in God. Psalm 34:6, "This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles." An amazing thing is that you can be rich and poor at the same point in time. The church in Smyrna may have been poor materially but Jesus says that they are rich spiritually. That's in stark contrast to the exact opposite. In fact, in Revelation 3:17, here's what Jesus says to the church at Laodicea, "Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked."

Now, we also see here that religious people can just be plain awful some time. That was the case here. The Christians in Smyrna are not only being persecuted by the pagan Gentiles but by hostile Jews and that's what Jesus says, they are Jews who really aren't Jews and by Satan himself. So apparently the local Jewish synagogue here, Jesus refers to them as "the synagogue of Satan." Why? Because they have aligned themselves with things that contradict God.

And these Jews it says, blasphemed. Now, that's an interesting word. I had to go back into the Greek and make sure because usually the word "blasphemed" is only reserved for God. You don't ever talk about blaspheming a person. You can slander a person. You can have malicious gossip about a person. But you can't blaspheme a person, you can only blaspheme God. So why did Jesus use the term here saying that the Smyranean Christians had been blasphemed? You need to understand that from God's perspective, when you attack one of his children, you are attacking him. Do you all parents understand that? Do you all understand that if one of you did something to hurt one of my kids, I would be on you like flies on stink. Why? Because they are my children and I am extra protective. I want to protect all your kids but there is an extra level of protection around my kids that I hold dear to me. You know, it was years and years ago when a constable told me that I didn't love my family and I said why? And he said, "Because you're not carrying a gun." He said, "I'll show up and take the crime report and what are you going to do until I show up?" So I took a concealed handgun class so that I could protect my family if the need ever arose. Now, you may not do that and I'm not telling you you need to do that but I want to tell you, I'm prepared to protect my family. Guess what? Jesus says, "If you attack one of my kids, I take it personally." And he takes stuff like that personally, doesn't

he? Wasn't it Jesus that said something to the effect of "for as you have done it unto the least of these my brethren, you have," what? "You have also done it unto me." You give them a cup of cold water, he remembers that. He's grateful for that. You show kindness to my kids and I appreciate that and Jesus takes it personally and here he says, "they have blasphemed."

By the way, he says these detractors falsely claim to be Jews and what that means is that, of course, you know, Jesus himself was a Jew. John who is recording these words is a Jew. But the term here, I don't think means it's Jews in the sense of the Jewish race but he's using the word in the sense of God's chosen people. What he's saying is that they are claiming to be God's chosen people but that's not the case. Who are God's chosen people? Well, we read that it's Christians who are God's chosen people. You read Romans 2:28-29, he says that it is not the descendents of Abraham who are descendents physically but it's the descendents of Abraham who are his descendents spiritually who claim the promise of the grace of God that are the real children of Abraham. That's who the real Jews are. That's what it means here when it says "they claim to be God's people but are not." Maybe we can look at an alternative translation and maybe this will help make it all clear. "I know (am aware of) the troubles you are undergoing. I know that you have few material possessions but you are rich in things of the heart (or spirit). I know about those who claim that they are God's chosen people, but are not. They say evil things about you, but they are really members of a group that belongs to Satan." Wow, an excellent way of looking at it.

Now, notice it says that they are poor. I told you there was an interesting Greek word for that and the Greek word was the "ptosis" which means "a drooping of the eyelids" and so you'll notice that this young man on the left, he is fully conscious, he is articulate and everything else but he has ptosis which is a condition that causes the eyelids to droop. In Matthew 5 when it says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," he's saying, "Blessed are those who in their own self-evaluation feel so unworthy of the merits or favors of God that they can't really lift up their eyes." In other words, they're not like the Pharisee who stood up and said, "O God, I thank you that I'm not like that person back there. I tithe." But we're more like the publican who couldn't look up but he beat his chest and said, "Have mercy on me, O God, I'm a sinner." You see, it's this idea that he can't look up.

By the way, that fellow on the right is an interesting fellow. His name is Phineas Gage. He lived from 1823 to 1860 and we owe a lot of our understanding of the human brain to him because doctors would never venture into doing anything with the human brain but he was a railroad construction foreman and they were using explosives to dynamite some way for the railroad and when an explosion happened, it threw a steel rod. That rod, by the way, is what he's holding in his hand, it's called a tamping iron; they used it to tamp down dirt and then they put down the railroad ties. Richard used to use something like it called a rock bar to breakthrough rock when he was digging post holes. Anyway, this tamping iron went through his skull and it destroyed most of the left frontal lobe of his brain. That's when we found out what the left side of the brain did versus the right side of the brain and it took him a long time, it's a miracle the guy lived, really. It took him a

long time to heal. He had a lot of social problems but later in life though, after he became a stagecoach driver in Chile, the regular routine helped him kind of order his mind and he started getting his personality back. But it was an interesting study. But you'll notice that one of the side effects, if you look at his left eye which is on your right, is that after that brain damage happened, he had this condition called ptosis where he couldn't look up.

So Jesus is saying to the Smyranean Christians, he says, "I know that you are so poor that it's shameful; that you are ashamed of the conditions you live in; that you're in utter poverty." Now, a lot of us feel poor but we've never reached the stage of the Smyranean Christians. We're rich compared to that.

Now, we have an enduring church. The good news is that we have an encouraging Christ and I want you to look at basically two pieces of encouragement he gives, the first of which he says, "be fearless." Be fearless. He says, "Do not be afraid of the things which you are about to suffer." Now, I don't know about you but when I hear suffering, when I think of suffering, the natural reaction is fear. Last Sunday, I went home and was prepared to relax and recoup and get ready for another week and I thought, oh things were great and about 11 o'clock that night I started having pain and the pain got worse and worse and worse. It turned out to be the second worst pain I have ever experienced in 52 years on the planet. Only one time I've ever hurt worse, after Judy and I were married, I guess it was in the first year of our marriage, I contracted the polio virus and I wanted to die that night. It was absolutely the worst pain. I've never found anything else to rival it until last Sunday night and I got dangerously close to feeling like I did when I had polio. I had abdominal pain like you wouldn't believe and I don't know what happened. I took all kinds of pain medicine and I tried to go to the emergency room and I was in so much pain that I couldn't get dressed to go to the emergency room. Finally, at about 9 o'clock that morning, I guess, I took a different kind of pill which just knocked me off my keister and finally I was able to ride out the pain unconscious until it was over. I think now, you know, the doctor was trying to tell me that it could be gallbladder, it could be these other things. I think now that I may have gotten a little touch of what Brendan had but in a king sized version because we later had a few other members of the family that had a little touch of stomach virus or something. But there's were all mild compared to mine. But that was some awful pain.

I want to tell you that when you get to that level of pain, you start thinking some bad stuff. You start thinking fearfully. It's a natural reaction that you start wondering, "What great thing is wrong with me? Have I suddenly developed appendicitis? Have I, what are all the things?" It's our natural reaction. In fact, it's so natural that when he says "do not be afraid," in Greek it literally says "stop being afraid." You see, things were already bad and the signs and the handwriting was on the wall, things were getting worse and so what were they doing? They were starting to be fearful. Now, it's actually interesting though that in Greek he's not talking to the entire church here, he's talking to the pastor. He's talking to the messenger or as the King James version renders it "the angel of the church." We know that because he uses a second person singular verb here and he's saying to the leader of the church, "Stop being afraid." Now why do you think he'd target the leader of the church? Of course, this section starts out and says, "but to the angel of the church at

Smyrna write," so it starts out addressed to him but do you know what? We need leaders who can encourage our hearts. We need pastors who can tell us to quit being afraid and it's got to start with leadership. Dads, let me tell you something: when there are tough times going on for your families, you do all your being scared in private but you need to be confident and trust in the Lord in front of your wife and in front of your children because they will derive their peace from your peace. Daddy needs to get his act together. Daddy needs to trust the Lord. Daddy needs to show that it's going to be okay, the Lord is going to work it out. When daddy can do that, everybody else can too. Guys, we don't like to talk about being afraid but sometimes life throws us curveballs that just scare the stuffings out of us. Be fearless, stop being afraid. He says, you're already doing it. Don't.

Do we have a reason to be afraid today? This is just kind of interesting. I know you can't see that up there but just let me point out a few things. This is a chart that from January, 2000 to March, 2014 so this is over 14 years and I'll just give you the amount of increases here. The price of a barrel of oil has gone up 314.8%. A gallon of fuel has gone up 242%. A gallon of gasoline has gone up 176.4%. A dozen eggs have gone up 106.2%. Annual healthcare spending has gone up 104.4% and it's going to skyrocket. Ground beef has gone up 96%. Movie tickets have gone up 95%. The average private college tuition has gone up 68.2%. Electricity has gone up 59.5%. Coffee has gone up 52.9%. You all don't need to see all these, you know that life is getting more expensive, right? It's inevitable that things are coming. Then you have to ask yourself: are bad times ahead where we're at? Again, this is not meant to be political but let's just look at the world we live in. China is about to go bankrupt. They have built whole ghost towns and they have put up buildings as public projects to keep people employed but now China is bankrupt. But for many years, they have been a creditor nation so they are about to go bankrupt but instead of going bankrupt, they are going to sell everything they have first and they own a whole bunch of US treasuries so they're going to sell US treasuries on the world and what's going to happen is that it's going to make it tough for the United States to sell U.S. Treasury notes and the US can't fund its own extra trillion dollars a year of deficit spending that we have right now. So what's going to happen? The only way we can keep deficit spending is that the federal reserve has to print more and more money so that they can buy the treasury notes themselves because nobody is going to buy the treasury notes we print when they can get them at a discount from China and every time they print more money, our money goes down in value and inflation is going to go up and up and what you're going to find is that eventually the United States dollar is going to do what every single paper currency in the history of the world has done, the value eventually goes to zero before it's over. Paper currency, dollars is not what you want to keep your money in. We're going to experience hyperinflation which means inflation over 20%.

Now, when I think about these things, frankly, it scares me a little because I have a family to take care of. Now, when you see the handwriting on the wall, there are some things that you can do to prepare for it and I'm going to do an afternoon seminar here soon to kind of give you some ideas about that. But, let me just show you some truths about suffering and right now is the time to get out your pen and copy this slide down on that extra piece of paper that you have in your bulletin because they are four truths about suffering. I'm going to go through each one of these truths so if you can't write them all

down, just lickety-split, it's going to be okay. There are four truths that Jesus is about to teach us about suffering. Number 1: suffering is certain. He says, "Be not afraid of the things which you are about to suffer." He didn't say which you might suffer. He said you're about to. When Jesus tells you that you're about to get it, guess what? You're about to get it. So it is certain Then it is constrained. He said, "You will experience affliction for 10 days." So Jesus put a boundary or a limitation on that suffering. Then he said it's controlled. He said, "The devil will cast some of you into prison." Well, how is that controlled? Because Jesus knew exactly what was going to happen. He told them exactly what would happen and he's letting them know that it isn't surprising to him. Jesus doesn't wake up one morning and say, "Oh boy, that surprised me." Why? Because he knows everything in advance so all of it is under his control. Then suffering is constructive. He says, "I will give you a crown of life."

So let's look at these truths one at a time. Suffering is certain. First of all, he knew about, Jesus knew about the lions and the crucifixions, the slayings by sword, the burnings but he doesn't go into detail about any one of these sufferings in particular. Now, here's the one point more than any other point that I want you to take away from this sermon, it's the key point. So if you're only going to take one note, here it is, write this down: how we endure hardships is more important to God than what hardships we endure. Let me say that again: how we endure hardships is more important to God than what hardships we endure. We're always thinking about the hardship and what form it's going to take and how do we get out of this? But what God is more concerned about is how we deal with the hardship rather than what the hardship is. Suffering is certain.

Suffering is constrained. Did you notice he mentions the 10 days. Now, there is a lot of thought of what that means but I think the clearest meaning seems to be that there were 10 periods of persecution of Christians under the Romans that the Smyrnan Christians went through. Now, some people say, "Well, the 10 days just means it's limited," and they can pull a few Scriptures that you can kind of piece together for that and I'll show you that in a minute but here are the 10 deals and I'll not read all those off. Of course, it obviously started with Nero and ended with Diocletian. By the way, I will ask you though to pay attention to number four on this list. Number four on this list was the persecution of Christians under Marcus Aurelius Antoninus in AD 162. What is significant about him is it was during this persecution that the pastor of the church at Smyrna, a man by the name of Polycarp, was put to death. I'm going to talk more about Polycarp in just a minute.

Now, there are times in Scripture that the number of 10 is used to talk about a limitation. For example, in Daniel 1:12, Daniel told the king's cupbearer, Melzar, he says, "Prove thy servants, I beseech thee, 10 days; and let them give us pulse to eat and water to drink." He says, 10 days was a limited amount of time for a sufficient trial. In Numbers 14:22, God says, "Because all those men which have seen my glory and my miracles which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness and have now attempted mean these 10 times and have not hearkened to my voice." In other words, he says, "That's the end of the test. They have tested me 10 times. They're still not believing me, now judgment is coming." So I want you just to understand that either way, whether you believe it's the 10 persecutions of the

Roman emperors or its just the fact that 10 is a limitation, our suffering is constrained. It's not boundless. It's not limitless. It has borders that will not go beyond these things. By the way, in Job 19:3, he says, "These ten times have ye reproached me: ye are not ashamed that ye make yourselves strange to me." Of course, you remember the words of Elkanah to his wife, Hannah, when she was crying over the fact that she didn't have a child, he says, "Am I not better to thee than," how many sons? "Ten sons." In other words, that 10 was kind of a number in the Hebrew mind for a valid test.

Then you notice that suffering is controlled. There are no surprises. He says, "The devil is going to cast some of you into prison." Now, the first thing to notice is he says, "Who is to blame for this imprisonment?" The devil is. Jesus says the devil is going to cast you into prison. Well, who actually did it? Well, it was the authorities. What Jesus is telling us is that whoever is oppressing Christians, whoever is persecuting his children, are agents of Satan. So in China, when the Chinese Communist government throws a Christian into prison for worshiping in a house church, they are being the agent of Satan. I didn't say it, Jesus did. Okay? So we need to understand that.

But in prison, you have to understand something about prison. Under Roman law, you could not be sent to prison forever. There was no life sentence. The fact is the Emperor Hadrian specifically carved out an edict and he wrote that no one could be sent to prison for life but you could be put into prison and held there until the time of trial and that might be years. But you would be held there for trial and if you were convicted, there were usually two forms of capital punishment: you either got banished forever or you got killed and they kind of seemed to prefer killing most of the time. And so, if you were a Christian and you refused to worship Caesar when it was Roman law to worship Caesar, you could be put to death. In other words, when he says, "The devil is going to throw you into prison," in the back of the Smyrnan Christian minds, they understood that what he's really saying is, "You're probably going to die." But guess what? This is no surprise to Jesus. It is controlled.

By the way, did you notice the other song Richard led us in? In verse two of "Like a River Glorious." It says this,

"Hidden in the hollow of His blessed hand,  
Never foe can follow, never traitor stand;  
Not a surge of worry, not a shade of care,  
Not a blast of hurry touch the spirit there.

"Stayed upon Jehovah, hearts are fully blest  
Finding, as He promised, perfect peace and rest."

It doesn't mean we'll never suffer but what it does mean is that even in the midst of our suffering, God has us in the hollow of his hand. Isn't that awesome? You know, the worst thing the world can do to you is to take your life and the best thing that can ever happen to you is to go to be with Jesus. Isn't that right? You know, the world can do their worst, all they're going to do is make me see my Savior sooner. That's alright.

Now, I want you to also know that suffering is constructive. We watched a video clip from "Facing the Giants" and, boy, what a powerful movie that was, what a powerful clip that was. But there were three things going on in that movie if you didn't notice. You first of all, had the guy on the ground who is doing the death crawl and he's keeping his knees off the ground and he's just on all fours and he's crawling and a little bit before that in the movie, basically he says, "Well, I think I can make the 15 or the 20," and then the coach says, "Well, I think you can make the 30" but he puts a blindfold on the guy so he can't see what he's doing and I don't know if you've ever noticed that but when you're going through times of suffering, maybe you're having a physical struggle. I remember years ago sitting in UT Southwestern Medical Center and the doctor telling me I either had Lou Gehrig's disease or two other things, none of which I wanted. I remember not being able to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Sometimes you go through that. Maybe it's a problem with a child and you can't see where this came from, where it's going to end, how you're going to get to the other side and you just feel like you're going through the struggle blindfolded. And this kid is crawling on his hands and knees, going blindfolded and the amazing thing is, he doesn't realize how much he's actually capable of doing if he has the encouragement of the coach.

Well, that's the second person in the story. The coach keeps encouraging him to give his all. He says, "Are you going to give me your best? Are you going to give me your very best? Your very best, Brock? Are you going to give me your very best?" So Brock is like the Smyrnan Christians and Jesus is like the coach who actually toward the end gets down on the ground with us and he crawls every step of the way with us, cheering us on and not letting us quit.

But the most remarkable thing to me is in that video clip, they start out when Brock is first crawling and they are kind of making fun of him because the coach has picked on him. They've already done the death crawl once and now Brock is going to do it again. They are kind of making fun of him and then they watch him and all of a sudden you see their faces on the sideline get a little more somber and all of a sudden you see one guy stand up in the back and then another guy stands up and before long the entire team is standing up and they're walking down the field watching Brock do what they thought was impossible. You see, that's the part about suffering we forget about, it's when we are in the midst of those lousy, bitter times, we forget people are watching and our grace, our peace, that we demonstrate while we're going through it is influencing other people for Jesus Christ. It's going to be in the coming times of suffering that I think we're going to experience throughout the United States that Christians have an opportunity to demonstrate grace under pressure and minister to others in a way that nothing else can because we'd all rather see a sermon than hear one.

By the way, notice what Jesus says, "If you're faithful, you will receive the crown of life." Now, Polycarp was probably one of the best examples of this principle. Polycarp, they came after him for pastoring a church there. The Apostle John had appointed Polycarp to be the Bishop of Smyrna. When they came after him to persecute him, he temporarily escaped soldiers and he was then found by a child. He actually prepared a feast, not just a

snack, but a feast for the people who came and took him captive and he asked in return that they grant him one hour to pray and they did and he prayed out loud and he prayed so fervently that his captors repented of the fact that they had been ordered to take him. Yet they did take him and he was sentenced to be burned in the marketplace. The Proconsul before they hooked him or put him on the stake, urged him, he said, "Swear, and I will release thee, reproach Christ." Polycarp's answer is famous. He said, "Eighty and six years have I served him and he never once wronged me; how then shall I blaspheme my King, who hath saved me?" Well, so they put him on the stake and normally they nailed people to the stake just like they nailed Jesus to the cross. That was to keep them from struggling and getting loose and he said to them, "Leave me as I am, for he that giveth me strength to endure the fire will also enable me without your securing me by nails to remain without moving in the pile." So they tied him to the stake by ropes and they lit the fire. The problem was and we don't really understand the whole polytechnics of all this but the fire formed an arch around Polycarp but never actually touched his body so finally they ordered the executioner to take the sword and they drove the sword into Polycarp's abdomen and so much blood and fluid came out that it practically extinguished the fire. They then ordered his dead body to be thrown on a pile with other bodies and the whole pile burned. He was denied burial but some later went and collected as much of his remains as possible so that they could honor him with a burial, no doubt, probably the members of the church of Smyrna.

So Christ tells us to be fearless but then he also tells us to be faithful. He says, "be faithful unto death." That pretty well clarifies what's going to happen when he says "the devil is going to throw some of you into prison." He then says, "be faithful unto death." And guess what? Your reward is the crown of life. James 1:12 says, "Blessed is the man that endureth temptation," and the Greek word "peirasmos" there means "testings." He says, "for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him."

1 2 

The truths about suffering

3  **Revelation 2:8-9**

*And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive; I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.*

4  **Revelation 2:10-11**

*Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.*

5  **An enduring church**

Smyrna: the rich poor church

6  **Smyrna**

- Large and wealthy city 35 miles north of Ephesus
  - Like Ephesus, it was a seaport.
  - In contrast to Ephesus, which today is a deserted ruin, Smyrna is still a large seaport with a large population.

7  **What's in a name?**

- Smyrna comes from a root word meaning "bitter"
- The name itself means myrrh, a perfume used in the anointing oil of the tabernacle, and in embalming dead bodies.
  - Smyrna's suffering gives off a perfume to God
- Truth: It is in our most bitter experiences that we have an opportunity to offer up the sweet-smelling sacrifice of faithfulness to Jesus.

8  **Our Savior knows suffering**

- *These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive*
- First and the last
  - Author and Finisher; He is in control from beginning to end
  - The Reason and the Goal
  - The Priority and the Promise
- Was dead and is alive
  - Suffered until death, but pioneered the RESURRECTION!

9  **Smyrna knew suffering**

- *I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.*
  - Tribulation = A continual state of affliction
  - Poverty = Extreme poverty (Matthew 5:3 – "poor in spirit")

- Smyrna is the rich poor church while Laodicea is the poor rich church

10  **2 Corinthians 6:5-7**

*But in all things approving ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, In stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in watchings, in fastings; By pureness, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Ghost, by love unfeigned, By the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left,*

11  **2 Corinthians 6:8-11**

- *By honor and dishonor, by evil report and good report: as deceivers, and yet true; As unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and, behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed; As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.*

12  **Is poverty ever a good thing?**

- Poverty can drive people to God
  - The poor cry out to God for justice because others are afflicting them.
    - Psalm 10:14 -- *Thou hast seen it; for thou beholdest mischief and spite, To requite it with thy hand: The poor committeth himself unto thee; Thou art the helper of the fatherless.*
  - In their circumstances there is no one else to whom they can turn.
    - Psalm 12:5 -- *For the oppression of the poor, for the sighing of the needy, Now will I arise, saith the Lord; I will set him in safety from him that puffeth at him.*

13  **You can be poor and rich at the same time**

- The church at Smyrna may be poor materially but it is rich spiritually.
- The situation in Laodicea is exactly the contrary; they boast that they are rich but are in fact poor (3:17–18).
  - Rich materially but poor spiritually (Revelation 3:17)

14  **Religious people can be awful**

- The Christians in Smyrna were being persecuted not only by pagan Gentiles but also by hostile Jews and by Satan himself.
  - Apparently the local Jewish synagogue was called the synagogue of Satan (cf. Rev. 3:9)
  - In the history of the church the most severe persecution has come from religionists.
- These Jews slandered (“blasphemed”) the Christians to get them in trouble with secular authorities.

15  **Another translation**

*I know (am aware of) the troubles you are undergoing. I know that you have few material possessions—but you are rich in things of the heart (or, spirit). I know about those who claim that they are God’s chosen people (Jews), but are not. They say evil things about you, but they are really members of a group that belongs to Satan.*

16

17  **An encouraging Christ**

18  **1. Be fearless**

- Fear is the natural reaction to suffering
  - *Do not be afraid of the things which you are about to suffer.* (LEB)
  - Literally “Stop being afraid”
    - This church was already freaking out because of their poverty, suffering, and the opposition of the Jews there.
    - 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular – actually addressed to the messenger of the church because the leader needs to communicate this idea to the congregation

19  **Are you afraid?**20  **Are bad times coming?**

- China is nearly bankrupt; ghost cities all over China
- They have been a creditor nation buying up US Treasury certificates
- When they can't pay their bills, they will sell Treasury certificates, making it hard for America to sell more of its own to finance out-of-control spending
- The Federal Reserve will print more money to buy more notes and bring hyperinflation to the United States (inflation > 20%)

21  **Truths about suffering**

- Suffering is CERTAIN – “what you are about to suffer”
  - Not “might suffer” but “about to suffer”
- Suffering is CONSTRAINED
  - “You will experience affliction for 10 days.”
- Suffering is CONTROLLED
  - “the devil will cast some of you into prison”
- Suffering is CONSTRUCTIVE
  - “I will give you a crown of life”

22  **Suffering is CERTAIN**

- Jesus knew all that would happen in the days to come.
  - He knew about the lions and the crucifixions, the slayings by swords and burnings.
  - But Jesus doesn't go into detail about the forms this persecution would take. Why?
- Key truth: HOW WE ENDURE HARDSHIPS MATTERS MORE THAN WHAT HARDSHIPS WE ENDURE.

23  **Suffering is CONSTRAINED**

- 1 1. Nero (A.D. 67)
2. Domitian (A.D. 81)
3. Trajan (A.D. 108)
4. Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, A.D. 162
5. Severus, A.D. 192
- 2 6. Maximus, A.D. 235
7. Decius, A.D. 249
8. Valerian, A.D. 257
9. Aurelian, A.D. 274
10. Diocletian, A.D. 303

24  **Suffering is CONSTRAINED (2)**

- The number 10 is often used to indicate limited testing in Scripture.
  - Daniel 1:12 -- *Prove thy servants, I beseech thee, ten days; and let them give us pulse to eat, and water to drink.*
  - Numbers 14:22 -- *Because all those men which have seen my glory, and my miracles, which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have tempted me now these ten times, and have not hearkened to my voice*
  - See also Job 19:3; 1 Samuel 1:8

25  **Suffering is CONTROLLED**

- There are NO SURPRISES for Jesus. He knows exactly what will happen.
- The prospect of prison.
  - Under Roman law, prison was not for punishment; it was for confinement.
    - You could be confined indefinitely until trial.
    - Capital crimes ended in death or banishment.
    - Emperor Hadrian forbid permanent imprisonment.
  - So if you went to prison as the result of your Christian faith, you expected to die.

26  **Suffering is CONSTRUCTIVE**

- The death-crawl in
  - *Facing the Giants* the guy with the blindfold couldn't see or understand what was really happening (like the Smyrnaean Christians).
  - The coach kept encouraging him to give his all (like Jesus).
  - The boys on the sideline start taking notice when they see the exceptional happening (like those who witnessed the faithfulness of the martyrs).
- Faithful endurers receive the crown of life

27  **Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna**

- Temporarily escaped soldiers; discovered by a child.
- Fed his captors and was granted an hour in prayer.
- Prayed with such fervency, that his guards repented that they had to take him. Sentenced to be burned in the market place

28  **Polycarp (2)**

- The proconsul then urged him, saying, "Swear, and I will release thee;--reproach Christ."
- Polycarp answered, "Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never once wronged me; how then shall I blaspheme my King, Who hath saved me?"

29  **Polycarp (3)**

- The executioners were about to nail him to the stake at which he would be burned.
  - Polycarp claimed the nails wouldn't be necessary.
  - He said, "*Leave me as I am; for He that giveth me strength to endure the fire will also enable me without your securing me by nails to remain without moving in the pile.*"

30  **Polycarp (4)**

- The flames formed an arch around Polycarp but didn't touch him.

- The executioner, on seeing this, was ordered to pierce him with a sword.
- His blood practically extinguished the fire.
- His dead body was burned on a pile and was refused a burial.
- Some later collected as much of his bones as possible, and caused them to be decently interred.

31  **2. Be faithful**

- Jesus encourages them to be faithful unto death.
  - This clarifies the intent of the Smyrnaean Christians being thrown into prison.
- The reward is the crown of life.
  - James 1:12 -- *Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him.*
  -