



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

6420 Churchill Way | Dallas, Texas | 75230 | t 972.239.5371 | believerschapeldallas.org

The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Revelation 2:8-11

“Suffering Saints”

Revelation

TRANSCRIPT

Our Scripture is Revelation chapter 2, and we’re going to look at verses 8-11. We’ve just begun this study, as you can see; we’re just in the second chapter, but this is the first part of the second division of the book. Back in chapter 1, there’s this glorious vision of Christ as he appears to John on the island of Patmos, and then in verse 19, the Lord gives a brief, simple outline of the book.

He says to John, “Therefore write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things.” What we have there is three divisions of this book. “The things which you have seen” is that which he saw in chapter 1, this great vision, this glorious vision of Christ. “The things which are” are the things that take place in chapters 2 and 3, with the seven letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor.

And those churches are historical churches, but they represent all churches throughout the ages. They give us a window on our own condition, the dangers we face, things that are commendable, things we should strive for, dangers that we need to avoid, warnings that are given. And then thirdly, he is to write of “the things which will take place after these things.”

And that’s the majority of the book, from chapters 4 to the end; future things. Well, we’re in the second division, the letters to the seven churches, and we come to the second church, the second letter, in chapter 2 beginning with verse 8.

“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this:

‘I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.’”

May the Lord bless this reading of his Word. Let’s bow together in prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we thank you for this time together as believers in Jesus Christ, men and woman who have been saved by your grace through the sacrifice of your Son. That salvation which we have received through faith alone, through no work of our own, through no merit of our own, but simply by your grace through faith. We have much to be thankful for every day.

We thank you for the eternal life that we possess that puts all of life in perspective. We will face hardship in this life. We’re reminded of that in this letter, that the Christian life is characterized by difficulty, suffering. And yet we have eternal life; this life will soon pass, but what we have in Christ, the crown of life, can never fade away, and so we have much to be thankful for spiritually, eternally.

But temporally as well, because that life is as real now as it will be then. It’s a life that begins at the moment of faith; the moment that you regenerate us and bring us to a saving knowledge of yourself. We have the life of Christ within us. We have fellowship with you, and knowledge of the triune God, and you are guiding and protecting us at every step of the way.

And again we’re reminded of that in this second letter to the seven churches, so we have much to be thankful for at every moment. Everything that happens in our lives is working out for our good. And then materially we have much to praise you for and thank you for. We live in a prosperous age. We live in a very prosperous nation. You give us an abundance of things. We lack nothing. We thank you for that.

We thank you for the abundance of your goodness and kindness to us, and pray that it will never become first in our lives; that it will never steal our hearts, but that they will always be fixed upon you. Fixed with love upon your Son, the Lord

Jesus Christ, who loved us and gave himself up for us; we give thanks, and we do so always.

But we not only thank you for our spiritual condition, which is the greatest blessing of all, but we thank you for the material things that you do give us, and pray for those that are going through difficulties at this time. Nothing happens randomly; things don’t simply occur without reason. They come, ultimately, according to your will and for our good.

We can’t always understand that, but we can know that that is true, because you assure us of that. So I pray that the afflictions that many of us are going through – many in this congregation are experiencing – would be received with that kind of confidence. With the knowledge that ultimately all of these things do work for our good. But we pray for those who are sick.

We pray for those that are suffering through difficulties of one kind or another. Perhaps emotional struggles, or difficulties at work, or lack of employment – the list goes on of health concerns and employment concerns. Father, you know all of our needs and all of our conditions, and you know how weak we are, that we are but dust. And yet you care for us and you support us.

I pray for those that are experiencing great difficulties now, that you would encourage them and restore them to health, restore them to work. Give them diligence in the things they do, and help them to overcome the hardships that they face in the home or in the marketplace, wherever it may be. Father, we pray for our nation. We are living in difficult times, trying times.

We are a nation at war with a strange enemy. We pray that you bless our leaders with great wisdom on both sides of the aisle. We pray that you give our President great wisdom. We pray that you would bless our troops in the field, and we pray particularly for those young men and women who are believers in Jesus Christ, that you would protect them and give them a great witness and testimony in a dark place.

But really, Lord, wherever we are, as your people we’re in a dark place because this world is a dark place, so help us all to be clear in our witness and bold in our witness. Give us encouragement to do that from this second letter, this letter to the church of Smyrna. Bless us, Father, in this time of study, and prepare our hearts.

Give us worshipful hearts. We pray these things in Christ’s name. Amen.

[Message] Two of the greatest words the Lord ever spoke are “fear not.” He said them all through the gospels. He spoke them to John in chapter 1 of this book. He says them again in the second letter to the seven churches, to the church of Smyrna. It needed the encouragement because it was about to suffer. That’s what this second letter is about – encouragement for the suffering church.

Christ forewarns the Christians of persecution, and encourages them to remain faithful. It’s been said that one of the marks of a true and living church is suffering. If love is the first mark, then suffering is the second. The one is the natural consequence of the other. Our Lord said in John 14:15, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” So if we’re obedient, we will face opposition.

The church in Smyrna had not lost its original love for Christ as the Christians in Ephesus had, and its devotion to the Lord became the occasion for hostility. Now, Smyrna would’ve been a nice place to live, materially. It was a prosperous city located about 35 miles north of Ephesus, and like Ephesus, it was a port city, a center of trade. The two cities were rivals, maybe a little bit like Dallas and Fort Worth were, at least some years ago.

They competed with one another, and competed for the title of first city of Asia, which Smyrna claimed for itself and stamped on its coins. Now, it had reasons for boasting of being first. It claimed to be the birthplace of the poet Homer, and it was praised by ancient writers for the beauty of its public buildings. Overlooking the city was Mount Pagus. It rose over 500 feet from the harbor.

The top was covered with magnificent temples, so that it was called “the crown of Smyrna.” It was the pride and the glory of the city. Around the mountain and through the city was a famous avenue called “the street of gold.” At either end of that great boulevard was a temple; one to Cybele, the other to Zeus, so it was a city filled with pagan shrines, and the first city in the ancient world to build a temple to the goddess Roma.

Smyrna was famous for its loyalty to Rome. On one occasion the citizens stripped off their coats and sent them to the Roman legions, who were suffering from cold in a winter campaign. Before Rome became great, Smyrna was loyal to it. Loyal in times of danger, loyal to Rome in times of difficulty – so much so that Cicero said Smyrna was “the most faithful of our allies.”

But due to its loyalty the city became a center of emperor worship. The citizens were expected to offer a pinch of incense before a bust of the emperor and confess Caesar

as Lord. Of course, that’s something that Christians could not do. As a result there was strong opposition to the church from the pagans, but also from the Jews. Smyrna had a large Jewish population, and it was actively hostile to the Christians.

The most famous martyrdom of the early church occurred in Smyrna when Polycarp, one of the church fathers – and as a young man, a personal friend of the apostle John – was burned alive. Both the Jews and Gentiles fetched the wood for the fire. So Smyrna was a prosperous city, a pagan city, and a persecuting city. But the Lord’s message to the church there in that city was “Fear not, I am with you,” so it was a protected church.

And it was a healthy church. It’s not known who established the church of Smyrna. Very likely, this church was established during Paul’s ministry at Ephesus, and as you go back to Acts chapter 19 and read about that great ministry that he had there, we read how the Word of God spread throughout the whole of Asia, and this is a church in Asia. In fact, all of these churches are located in the province of Asia.

And so it’s likely that it’s the product of Paul’s ministry there in Ephesus, but it was spiritually more prosperous than the church of Ephesus, because it had not done what that church had done, and had not received the criticism that that church had received. In fact, no criticism is given of this church in this letter. The church of Ephesus had left its first love; the church of Smyrna had not.

The Lord has no criticism of it – just commendation. But he has a warning for it as well, and that’s how we really begin the letter. He gives them a warning in order to alert the church to imminent danger, and the warning comes from the one who is the first and the last, who was dead and has come to life. That’s an appropriate greeting for people who might suffer martyrdom.

The first and the last – that’s a designation that God made of himself in Isaiah 44:6. “I am the first and the last,” he says, “and there is no God besides me.” Now, that’s what Christ says of himself, so he takes that ascription of deity and he applies it to himself. He’s saying, in effect, “I’m that God” – the God of Isaiah, the God of the Old Testament is Christ Jesus, the second person of the trinity.

So the one who greets them is none other than God himself, God the Son, which is an encouragement to stay faithful to him. The Lord alone is lord, not Caesar. Now, he has passed through the great trial that they would face, and he triumphed over it. He was dead, and has come to life. That was an appropriate description to give to the Christians of this city, because Smyrna had a similar experience.

700 years before this letter was written, the city had been destroyed. It lay in ruins for four centuries, and then was rebuilt on a magnificent scale, so that it was a resurrected city. So from their own history, these people had an appreciation of returning to life and conquering death. In fact, what you see in so many of these letters seems to be the Lord taking attributes of the city, historical events, and using them in his encouragement, or exhortation, or warnings to the various churches that he addresses here.

And here he draws upon this experience that the city had of being rebuilt after lying waste for so long to encourage them about himself and what he can do for them. He had been through what one commentator calls “a Smyrna experience.” He had conquered death, and would bring them through death victoriously. That’s the promise that he gives to us – gives to all of this people.

In Isaiah 43:1-2, the Lord assured Israel, “Fear not, for I have redeemed you. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, for I am the Lord your God.” That’s the assurance that lies behind this description that he gives – the first and the last, who was dead and has come to life.

They needed such assurance. They lived in a difficult place. They lived in a dangerous place. And the Lord tells them in verse 9 that he was aware of their condition; he’s fully aware of their circumstances. He walks among the seven golden lampstands; that’s how he addressed the church in Ephesus in the first verse of this chapter. He’s always patrolling the churches. He’s here.

That’s how we should understand our relationship to the Lord. He is seated at the Father’s right hand, and yet he’s here. He’s among the seven lampstands. He is among the churches in every age, and he’s with us today. He’s here. And because he is, he knows our situation, and he knew what the Christians of Smyrna faced. Their trials had not escaped his notice.

There were four of them: the trials of poverty, slander, prison, and death. He speaks first of their poverty in verse 9, and he says that he knows of it. “I know your tribulation and your poverty.” There are different kinds of poverty. In some poverty, people have only the basics, and if we have anything that remotely resembles poverty in this nation of ours, it would be that kind of poverty – people have only the basics.

Now, that’s bad, and nobody wants to face that, but in this kind of poverty that the Lord is speaking of here, the kind of poverty that the people of Smyrna faced, they had nothing at all. This is extreme poverty, and it seems connected to their tribulation. They were made destitute because of the hostile environment in which they were living. The Jews and the pagans probably excluded Christians from trading with them.

They blackballed them from business. they shut them out of work. They wouldn’t hire them. They wouldn’t trade with them. They, as a result, prevented them from earning a living. Or worse, they may have pillaged their property. That wasn’t unheard of in the first century; in fact, it was not uncommon.

We read of that happening to the Christians of Rome, assuming that the book of Hebrews is written to the Christians of Rome. Because in Hebrews 10:34, he speaks of their property being seized. So it wasn’t uncommon for Christians to experience vandalism and robbery and destruction of their property. Poverty is sometimes the cost of discipleship; the cost of being honest in one’s dealings, and true to Christ, regardless of the consequences.

It was a cost of discipleship there are the church in Smyrna. But still, in spite of that – in spite of the fact that they were poor and persecuted, the Lord says, “But you are rich;” poor in worldly goods, but rich spiritually. For many, that would be small consolation, and I can imagine some sitting there listening to that and scoffing a bit, thinking, “Well, okay, I guess it’s good to be positive and find a silver lining in a dark cloud, but personally, I’ll take the money, cars, and houses.”

And we can all understand that – that’s in all our hearts. It’s in my heart – I confess that, but I also know this, that materialism is an appetite that is never satisfied. It just gets bigger. More is never enough. There is a richness in spiritual things that is satisfying beyond anything the world can offer.

People pursue things, and big bank accounts, and exciting experiences, all of that, in order to gain joy, or peace, or something that seems so elusive. And that’s what we have. That’s what Christ gives us – whether we have things or not, we do have peace and joy and love, for living by the Spirit, that’s what we experience. And those are experiences that transcend all the trials of life

What we have in Christ gives meaning in life, and strength in death. There are different ways to measure wealth. Archbishop Trench said, “There are poor rich men,

and rich poor men.” People in Smyrna were rich poor men; poor Christians, but they had much. And what we have in this life, the real things that we have in this life – not tangible things, but the spiritual realities of our life, which are great riches – cannot compare to what we are yet to receive when we pass from this life into the next.

We have incredible wealth awaiting us in the world to come, and when those Christians in Smyrna were to pass through – or we could apply this to ourselves – through those waters and enter eternity, Christ promised in Luke 18:30 that whatever they lost in this life, and whatever you and I lose in this life due to our loyalty to him, will more than be made up for there, and forever, in eternal riches.

Now, that’s a great promise; a true promise, something we need to hold onto. Poverty, though, is still a great trial in life. Not to dismiss the reality of the trial – it is a great trial in life, and they had that trial. It could be a crushing trial. But it wasn’t the only trial they had. It wasn’t their only hardship. In fact, it may not even have been the worst. They were also slandered.

The Lord says that he knows of “the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.” Now, the word “blasphemy” here is a literal translation of the Greek word *blasphēmia*. It means “railing” or “slander.” That’s probably the meaning here. Not so much slander against Christ as slander against the Christians.

And so these Jews made all kinds of unjust accusations against them and spread untrue rumors about the church and the Christians of Smyrna. Some of the early slanders that were made against the Christians were against their form of worship and what they did, because weekly it was the practice of the church to observe the Lord’s supper. You read through the book of Acts and see very early in the second chapter on about the church meeting and breaking bread.

Breaking bread is a technical term for observing the Lord’s supper. They did that weekly, as we do here at the evening meeting. They called that meeting a “love feast.” It was a love feast. It was love between believers and between their Lord. It was time in which they were reminded of God’s love for them, and their love for him, and their love for one another.

But as the world got hold of that expression, they gave it the meaning of their own culture, and they interpreted it as something like a Roman orgy. And that’s what they accused the Christians of doing; of meeting together and having a bacchanal of

sorts. And then when the Christians spoke of the Lord’s supper as eating Christ’s body and drinking his blood, they interpreted that as cannibalism, and they accused the Christians of that.

These were some of the early slanders against the church. This is the way it’s always been. Slander is not unusual. Paul experienced slander as well in his ministry. In Acts 17, the Jews of Thessalonica stirred up the city by saying, “These are the men who have upset the world.” That’s a great description, I think. They don’t intend it to be a good description, but it’s what the apostles did.

They turned the world upside-down with the preaching of the gospel. And so they say, “They turned the world upside-down and they act contrary to the decrees of Caesar.” Well, what they’re saying there is that these are unpatriotic men. These are revolutionaries. They’re going to disturb the general order. We need to put them down, get rid of them.

Well, they weren’t patriots, and they weren’t concerned about any of that. Luke tells us that they did all of this because they had become jealous because Paul and Silas’ preaching had penetrated the synagogue, and a large number of God-fearing Greeks and leading women of the city had believed the gospel, had left the synagogue, and entered the church.

That was likely the reason for the slander that came from the synagogue in Smyrna. The Jews had lost some of their congregation to Christ, and out of jealousy, they attacked the church. That, too, is often the cost of discipleship. People may spread false rumors about you. They may do it out of jealousy. They may do it because they hate the message that you give, or they hate the life that you live that convicts them of their sin.

And so their desire is to get rid of you, or bring you down in some way, and so they seek to do that by spreading scandalous rumors, saying things that aren’t true. But about all of this, the Lord says, “I know.” He’s well aware of it all. He knows what’s happening. He’s God. He’s all-knowing. He’s all-caring. That’s the assurance he was giving.

That’s the kind of Savior we have. He’s not distant. Oh, he’s seated at the right hand of the Father, that’s true, and where that is, I don’t know. Far away, I’m sure – but he’s not far away. He’s seated at the Father’s right hand, yet he’s always

with us. He again walks among us. He knows our cares and burdens and afflictions, and he carries them with him.

He has been there himself. In 1 Peter 2:23, Peter states that he was reviled. He was reviled at his trial. But he didn’t revile in return. “He uttered no threats,” Peter says, “but kept entrusting himself to him who judges righteously.” And that’s how we are to respond. That’s difficult to do. Slander is painful, and attacks, verbal or physical, are painful. Lies hurt. Rumors wound deeply. But we can’t resort to insults.

We can only leave things to the Lord. Trust him – that’s what our Lord did. He trusted his Father. We’re to do the same, and trusting him means knowing that he understands, and in his time, and in his way, he will exonerate. Now, that’s a life of faith. That’s not easy to do. We want to seize things, and take control, and correct things, and to some degree, we should do that.

But ultimately, we can only trust the Lord to set the record straight and exonerate us, and the assurance is that he will do that. Christ didn’t utter threats. He trusted himself to his Father, who judges righteously. Now, that truth, that assurance that the Lord knows, that the Lord will take care, that he doesn’t ignore our condition, that’s given hope to suffering saints down through the ages.

John Stott, in his treatment of this text, refers to the Christian slaves in America and how they found comfort in this, and they expressed that in one of their old spirituals in which they would sing, “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen/Nobody knows but Jesus.” Now, that’s familiar to all of us. We’re familiar with those lines, and the problem with familiarity is sometimes you lose the significance of the profundity of a statement.

That’s a profound statement – simple statement, but an encouraging statement; a profound statement. The Lord knows what we’re going through, and that’s what the Lord was assuring them of here. As they faced great trials and suffering, he was aware of it. It wasn’t escaping his notice, and he would deal with it. He’s very concerned about this church.

Sir William Ramsey, in his book *The Letters to the Seven Churches*, comments that this second letter is different from all of the others in its tone. There’s no complaint – I think I mentioned that earlier. That’s typical of the letters. There’s no

complaint to the church of Philadelphia, and there’s no complaint to this church of Smyrna. All the others, there’s a complaint that the Lord has.

But not here; and not only that, the Lord is in complete sympathy with this church. He is filled with warm affection for the people. That’s the tone of the letter. He knows their trials, and he’s sympathetic because he’s passed through those trials himself. He has a special sympathy and concern for you as well as you go through difficulties, through the emotional and the physical struggles of life.

He knows your trouble. He knows how best to help. He knows how to strengthen you in them. He would do that for the Christians of Smyrna. He also knew the source of their troubles, and ultimately it wasn’t the Gentiles. It wasn’t the Jews. It was Satan. He says of their adversaries that “they say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.”

Now, when he says they’re not Jews, he doesn’t mean they’re not physical Jews, or they’re not really Jews. They are really Jews. They are physical Jews. They are physically descended from Abraham, but they’re not spiritual Jews. They have been circumcised in the flesh, but not in the heart. They were, as Jesus told the Pharisees of his day in a rather heated exchange in John 8:44 that they were “of their father the devil.”

And he says of the devil, “He was a murderer from the beginning, and the father of lies.” And so they demonstrated that they were of their father the devil because they were seeking his death on the one hand, and they were slandering him. They were speaking lies about Christ. Well, the Jews of Smyrna were doing the same thing. They were spreading lies.

They were spreading slander, which would lead to harm and even death for Christians, many of whom were Jews saved out of the synagogue. The Lord forewarns them of that in verse 10. “Do not fear what you are about to suffer,” he says. “Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison.” Prison was a familiar place to the apostles.

Peter spent time in prison. Paul spent time in prison – a lot of time in jails all over the Roman world. And some in Smyrna would go to jail for the truth. They would suffer for their faith. Well, so much for triumphalism; so much for prosperity theology. So much for the promises that we hear so often today that the Christian life,

when it’s really lived, walking in obedience to Christ, and walking by the Spirit, is a life of health and happiness and no difficulties.

Well, that’s a fable. That’s not the teaching of Scripture. That should be plain from this one letter, but we find it all through Scripture. Now, there is a true prosperity theology. There is a real prosperity in the Christian life, and they had it there in Smyrna. It was prosperity spiritually, through poverty and prison. It was growing spiritually through affliction.

That’s the Christian life. Don’t be misled. The Christian life, according to the apostles, is full of hardship. Paul said in 2 Timothy 3:12, “Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” And again, behind it all is the evil one, the devil, which means “slanderer,” and “Satan” means “adversary.” Both words defined him.

He is our great adversary; he is our great enemy. He is the one who is behind all of our troubles in the church; the one who brings grief upon us in the church, or at home, or at work. False teachers arise in a church – ultimately it’s Satan that’s behind that. Opposition at work – ultimately it’s Satan behind that. Our battle is not really with human governments, or colleagues, or family members, or religious rivals.

It’s with the devil, who is the one behind these things. We fight a spiritual war. Paul develops that thoroughly in Ephesians chapter 6, but we find it everywhere. It’s an invisible war. It’s not a tangible battle that we touch, or see, or feel, but it’s real, and it’s what energizes so much of the opposition to us. Well, this is the way he describes it, and yet though it has a spiritual source to it, and it’s energized spiritually, it has a material, physical reality to it.

They would experience that. They would go to prison, and perhaps even death. In fact, in the ancient world, prison was not so much a place of punishment. It was a place of confinement for those who had been accused who were awaiting trial, and if they were guilty, they’d go to their death. So very often, going to prison meant going to death. But the Lord says, “Do not fear” – literally, “Fear nothing.”

That’s hard to do. But the Lord gives two assurances. First, that the trial is temporary. It would last for ten days. Now, that can be interpreted different ways, but I think the simplest way is to take it literally. There’s no reason not to. This trial, whatever it was – we don’t know what it was – but he says it’s going to last ten days. But however you interpret that, the significance of that ten days is it’s temporary.

It won’t last forever. Our trials never do. Now, we may feel like they will never end while we’re in them, and when they’re intense, that’s the way it does feel, but they do end. And we have the assurance that they will end, and that something better will follow. Now, in this case, death might follow, because the Lord goes on to say, “Be faithful until death.”

He was saying that to people in a city famous for its loyalty to Rome. So trading off that reputation, Christ is urging them to be loyal to him, and I think he’s saying something to this effect: you are living among people who pride themselves on their loyalty to the emperor, and to the empire. You show them a greater loyalty. You show them how you can be loyal to the one who is the true king, and to his kingdom, which would outlast Rome and all other kingdoms, and be a kingdom forever.

Be faithful until death. Death will not end life. It will end the temporal trials of life, and be the entrance into far greater life, where Christ says they will receive the crown of life. That’s not a special reward for martyrs. It could possibly be taken that way. I don’t take it that way. I think it means the crown that is life. You see it in parallel or in contrast to the last statement about the second death.

The second death is eternal death; I’ll talk about that in a moment. In contrast to that is the crown of life, which is eternal life. So this isn’t a reward; this is not what we earn or anything of that kind. This is the promise of eternal life that is for all who believe in Christ, all who belong to him. We have that. That’s what awaits us.

The promise would have very well reminded them of the crown of Smyrna – the circle of colonnaded buildings on top of Mount Pegas, and an image that would have been very firmly fixed in their minds. They’d grown up in the shadow of that glorious structure, that crown of Smyrna. They’d seen it. It was the pride of their city, and so when he speaks of a crown of life, they might well have thought of that crown.

And the thought of the beauty and the glory of their city would have stirred up within them a sense of the infinitely greater glory of the life to come that they would inherit in the world to come. That’s the promise we have – life that is beautiful, glorious, eternal, world without end. That’s encouragement. That’s incentive to be faithful to the end; to the bitter end.

And the Lord reinforces that at the end of the letter with the promise that “he who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.” The second death is spiritual death. It follows the first death. It follows physical death. Later, in chapter 20:14, it is called “the lake of fire,” so it’s eternal punishment. Believers had been delivered from that. They will not be harmed by it.

By God’s grace, we overcome; we are victors. That’s the idea. Like runners in a race – Smyrna was famous for its games. Like the athletes who cross the finish line victorious, we will enter eternity victorious. We’ll enter as champions. Some of them would face death, but then, we all do. The first death, physical death, may sting; it may hurt for a moment. But it’s only for a moment.

Psalm 23 says we pass through the valley of the shadow of death. Shadows are dark. They can cause fear. But shadows can’t hurt, and physical death ultimately cannot hurt us. Many of the Christians of Smyrna were made to suffer prison and death. We are assured of that from what the Lord says, and we can assume that they faced it and endured it bravely. They did it well, as victors, just as Polycarp did a generation later.

He was martyred, as I said earlier, in Smyrna, on February 23, A.D. 155. Polycarp was a faithful minister, and a very old man when he was brought before the Roman governor. He refused to deny Christ. He refused to confess Caesar as lord. He answered, “For 86 years I have served him, and he has done me no wrong; how can I blaspheme my king who saved me?”

So he was burned at the stake. He was faithful until death. And you wonder how it would be possible to endure such trial; it’s interesting to read about that. It’s somewhat thrilling to hear such stories of that. But then you begin to apply it to yourself and wonder, “If I was in that circumstance, would I be so faithful?” I mean even with the hope of heaven, and the encouragement.

Death will only be the door to eternal glory, and then you will not suffer the judgment to come; you have been delivered from that. Nevertheless, to go through that first death is a daunting thing, and we wonder if our strength would hold out. Would we be faithful? Well, I think implied in the encouragement that the Lord gives here not to fear is the assurance that God would see them through their trials.

He will see us through our trials. He gives strength where we don’t have it. I thought of this analogy as I was pondering that – the instance in which Peter walks on

the water. Now, that’s unique. Happened once, won’t happen again. It happened for a purpose, to illustrate great truth. Peter did the impossible. He stepped out on the water, and he walked on the water as long as his eyes were fixed on Jesus Christ.

When he took his eyes off, remember, he sunk. But the Lord snatched him up and put him back in the boat, and that’s how we walk through life. We step out in impossible circumstances, not in our own strength, not in our own ability – Peter didn’t get out of the boat because he said, “You know, I really think I’ve got this skill of walking on water. I’ve worked on that as a fisherman.”

He just knew that Christ was there, and he went for it. And as we walk by faith, we have strength. So no, we don’t have the strength of ourselves to face something like this, but as we look to the Lord, we will find that we do have it. So the Lord exhorts them, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” He who has spiritual life, obey. Be faithful.

That statement, “he who has an ear, let him hear,” reminds me of my first trip to the Orient. It was in 1974. I traveled to Turkey, and I spent my first night in the city of Izmir, which is the modern name for ancient Smyrna. So I spent my first night in Smyrna. It was early in the morning, at dawn, and still dark, actually, that I realized how foreign the place really was; at least foreign to a young guy from Texas.

There was this strange sound that I woke up to, and I don’t know if you’ve had this experience maybe when your alarm clock goes off. It just seems to go on forever, and that’s the way this sound just seemed to go on. And when I finally came out of this sleep, I realized that I was hearing the call to prayer from a mosque on the hill – perhaps Mount Pegas.

And as I moved through the city and I traveled through that land, I saw what a thoroughly Moslem place Turkey is. It seemed like there were mosques on almost every street corner, and this is a land that at one time was the center of apostolic activity, and home to many great churches. All of that is gone. All of that is a thing of the past, long gone.

As a Christian, I think we must ask ourselves why that is. Well, the answer is found here in this second letter to the seven churches, with the Lord’s command, “Be faithful until death.” There came a time when these churches weren’t. In the eighth century, the warriors of Islam rode off the deserts of Arabia, swept over the Middle East and Asia Minor, across North Africa, with a new god and a different gospel.

The churches didn’t stand, but then, they had grown weak. They had become unbelieving, and eventually they all fell under the threat of the Moslem sword. And today, what had been a land of the cross is a land of the crescent. Instead of ministers proclaiming the gospels, there are Mu'azzins calling people to prayer. Well, it can happen here in America, and it has.

New England was once filled with vibrant churches. The preaching of Whitfield and Edwards was heard there; brought about the Great Awakening. But by the early 19th century, a generation later, that had passed, and Unitarianism had swept over the region. Today, few there know the names of Whitfield and Edwards, and I would bet that very few even know the names of the apostles.

It can happen here at Believer’s Chapel, if we don’t stay faithful. Well, by God’s grace, we will; but his grace is communicated through his Word, and is received through spiritual ears, and a readiness to obey, and love for him who first loved us. You who do will stand, and you will remain faithful through the trials of life, and should you suffer, as we must suffer if we’re obedient, you’ll not suffer in vain.

There is the crown of life that awaits you. Be faithful until death. That’s the message for us, but if there are any attending this morning who have not believed in Christ, he’s the eternal Son of God who became a man and died in the place of sinners. And the gospel is very simple: he’s paid the price. Believe in him and he’s paid it for you.

Join yourself to him through faith, and you join yourself to the cross and his sacrifice. Believe in him and you escape the second death. May God help you to do that – help all of us to live faithfully. Let’s pray.

[Prayer] Father, we do pray that for ourselves. We pray that you would enable us to be faithful; to be filled with love for you, for your Son, for the one who first loved us and gave himself for us. May we serve him faithfully in all that we do. Thank you for your grace that saves. Thank you for the Lord Jesus Christ, and it’s in his name we pray. Amen.