

INI

Revelation 2,8-11

2nd Last Sunday of the Church Year — 13 November 2016

Greeting: To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; mercy, peace, and love be multiplied unto you. Amen.

We hear a portion of the Epistle lesson from the Revelation of Saint John the Divine, which was read earlier:

[Jesus says:] “Do not fear what you are about to suffer ... Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

So far the reading. Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O LORD, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Introduction: We have all heard the expression: Short term pain for long term gain.

What does this mean if we apply it to our everyday lives?

I, for one, do not like to go to the dentist. When I was small I had bad experiences with the dentist. My parents sent me to a German dentist who did not believe in using anesthetics. That made visiting the dentist a painful experience. But I go. I get fillings and crowns. I endure the short term pain, the pin prick of the needle, for example, so that I will preserve my teeth.

Perhaps we want a holiday. What do we do? We save our money so we can afford the holiday. Or if we want to buy a house; we save for the down payment. This means we may have to put off buying some things we want, or eat hamburger instead of steak. Again, a version of short term pain for long term gain.

If we have a big test in school, we may have to study, and that may mean giving up a favorite TV show or not going out with friends. Again, a version of short term pain for long term gain.

What, however, does this mean for our spiritual lives?

Jesus is not talking about taking an hour or more in order to go to church or Bible study or read the Bible at home. God forbid, though, that anyone should think that these activities are in any way “painful.”

Jesus is talking about experiencing and enduring times of tribulation. These are times when the devil wants to break the spiritual relationship between a Christian and God and between a Christian and his fellow-believers. But God promises to be with Christians in times of tribulation and promises to give them “the crown of life” and spare them from “the second death.” In relation to God’s promises, times of tribulation are times of short-term pain and the long-term gain is life eternal and blessedness with Jesus.

This brings me to today’s sermon theme for today: “**Enduring Tribulation.**” I’ll develop this theme in three parts:

- 1) Tribulation Is Being Under Pressure**
- 2) Jesus Endured Tribulation;** and,
- 3) God’s Promises Ease The Pressure**

1) Tribulation: Being Under Pressure. Jesus appeared to John the Apostle while John was in exile on the isle of Patmos. This is about 60 years after Jesus had died, risen from the dead, and ascended into heaven. But Jesus is still with those whom He had called. He told John to write seven letters to seven churches, all of which were in Asia Minor, or present day Turkey. Today we look at Jesus’ words to the church in Smyrna, or present day Izmir.

Smyrna was a port city and north of Ephesus. It was one of the most prosperous cities in Asia Minor. It was one of the first cities in Asia to erect a statute to the emperor and worship the emperor as a god on earth. It had a large Jewish population. Both the secular government and the Jewish population were hostile to both Jesus and the Christians in Smyrna.

The reference in Revelation is the only mention in the Bible of a Christian congregation in Smyrna. It is possible that the Gospel came to Smyrna from Ephesus during Paul’s third missionary journey, from AD 53 to 57 (Acts 19,10).

Christians in Smyrna were being persecuted by the Roman authorities

and the Jews.

The Christians are described as being “poor.” There are two words in the New Testament to describe the poor. One word means those who have enough to get by from day to day. The other word describes those who are destitute. The Christians in Smyrna are described as “destitute.” Materially they had nothing. This could have been a result of persecution. In the Letter to the Hebrews we read of Christians who had their property seized because they confessed Jesus as Lord (Hebrews 10,34).

The authorities were ready to throw some of the Christians in jail.

The Christians were hard pressed. In fact, that is what lies behind the word “tribulation.” Tribulation occurs when pressure of some sort is applied to an object, or in this case, a person. As the pressure is increased and increased, whatever is being pressed eventually will crack and break under that pressure or tribulation.

Who is behind applying this pressure? Outwardly it may seem that the Roman authorities and the Jews are. But what does Jesus say?

Jesus says the Jews in Smyrna belong to the “synagogue of Satan” (2,9) and it is the devil and not the Romans who are preparing to throw Christians into jail (2,10).

During His earthly life Jesus told some Jews that they were “of your father the devil ... who is the father of lies” (John 8,44). Why did Jesus say this? Because His enemies did not believe He came from God and was the Messiah. Who stands behind this kind of lie? First, the sinful self. But secondly, behind the sinful self, stands the father of lies, that is, Satan himself.

What is the purpose of the devil in bringing tribulation into the lives of Christians, of God’s saints? Jesus tells us: “that you may be tested” (2,10).

The devil wants to squeeze Christians to the breaking point. He wants to put pressure on Christians until they break and feel isolated from God and their fellow believers. He wants to break their faith.

Jesus delivered every Christian from “the kingdom of darkness”, of sin,

death, and condemnation to His Kingdom of grace, life, and forgiveness (Colossians 1,13). Now the devil wants to break Christians so they fall back into darkness and death.

But the pressure that devil uses to try to break us is nothing new. He used that pressure first to try to break Jesus. But in His Son, God shows us that:

2) Jesus Endured Tribulation. To comfort the Christians in Smyrna, Jesus describes Himself as “the First and the Last, Who was dead and came to life again” (2,8). What does this say about Jesus? Why is it comforting?

Before there was such a thing a tribulation, indeed, before there was anything at all, at least as we know it, there was Jesus. The first words of John’s Gospel tell us the same thing:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1,1)

Before God said, “Let there be light” (Genesis 1,3), Jesus was there.

And after history comes to an end with His coming again in glory, Jesus will be there. After death, sin, and the devil will suffer their final defeat, Jesus will stand as the victor.

Later in Revelation, Jesus says the same thing:

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End. (Revelation 22,13)

From the first letter of the alphabet to the last letter, from before history begins to after it ends, Jesus is there.

This is what God says of Himself in the Old Testament by the prophet Isaiah:

Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel
And His Redeemer, the LORD of Hosts:
‘I am the First and the Last,
And there is no God besides Me.’ (Isaiah 44,6)

Jesus is the King of Israel, the Old Testament people of God who looked forward to His coming, and the King of God's new Israel, the Church, those who believe that He is indeed the Redeemer (see: Galatians 3,7; Colossians 1,17).

To be the Redeemer, Jesus died and then He returned to life. He did not die for Himself, but He died for you and I, so that we and all who believe in Him might be brought out of the darkness of sin, death, and the power of the devil into Jesus' marvellous light.

For us he became poor. Paul says:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich. (2 Corinthians 8,9)

He voluntarily left the riches of heaven — riches that are beyond our imagination — and took on our flesh. During His lifetime, He became poor and experienced the same kind of poverty that the Christians in Smyrna were experiencing. This is skid-row poor. This is beggarly poor. This is truly depending on God each day and perhaps each hour for your daily bread. This is the pressure cooker of tribulation and affliction, but Jesus did not crack under the pressure.

He experienced the rejection of His own people. “He came to His own [that is, the Jews], and those who were His own did not receive Him” (John 1,11). At times during His ministry, His own flesh and blood family rejected Him and thought Him to be crazy (Mark 3,21.31). And at the end of His life, His disciples, those whom He had called to follow Him, fled in fear (Mark 14,50). One of His disciples, Judas, even trusted Satan more than Jesus and betrayed his Master to the authorities. This is the pressure cooker of rejection, betrayal, and tribulation but Jesus did not crack under the pressure.

Jesus was falsely accused and whipped, and crucified. Before and during His crucifixion He was cruelly mocked and teased. On the Cross God the Father hid His face from His Son. Jesus died in the darkness of rejection (Matthew 27,45-46). But even in the midst of this unnatural, noon-day darkness Jesus could say: “Father, into Thy hands I commit My Spirit” (Luke 23,46). In spite of everything, Jesus trusted in God the Father. This is the pressure cooker of tribulation and finally of death itself, but Jesus did not

crack under the pressure.

Since Jesus was “tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted” (Hebrews 2,18). He was “tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4,16).

He died as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He died once and for all for our sins and the sins of the world.

But He also rose from the dead, never to die again. His resurrection is the light that shines through the darkness of sin and death and shows that He is the victor and not the victim.

When the devil tempts, He tries to break us, to break the believer’s faith in Jesus. When so tempted, Jesus just said, “It is written.” His strength was the Word of God. This was the Word which said that He would die, not for Himself, but for the sins of others. This was the Word that Jesus followed to the Cross, to the grave, and then out of the grave into life everlasting. This is the Word that shines through the darkness of tribulation.

When tribulation comes it is a burden. But it is a burden that Jesus took on Himself and He promises to help us carry. For the believers in Smyrna as well as ourselves,

3) God’s Promises Ease The Pressure. In the midst of the tribulations of life God’s promises, which all have their “Yes” in Jesus, ease the burden of tribulation.

In the midst of material poverty, Jesus reminds the believers in Smyrna and us of the spiritual riches He has won for us. “I know your tribulation and your poverty,” says Jesus, “but you are rich!” (2,9).

All believers in Christ have riches beyond compare. These riches begin with the forgiveness He has won for us. Forgiveness cannot be bought or earned. It is available only through one person — Jesus, Who died but once but now is alive forevermore.

Forgiveness restores a relationship with God that had been broken on account of sin. Forgiveness tells us that sin, death and the devil can deceive, but they have no power. Forgiveness opens the door to heaven and eternal

life.

Jesus promises that the imprisonment of the Christians will be limited to ten days. While many numbers in Revelations have a symbolic meaning, we can say that whether a real or symbolic number, Jesus promises that the tribulation will be limited. It will come to an end. It will not go on forever — after all, ten days is a relatively short period of time.

If the absolute worst happens, and someone dies, this is not the end. For those who are faithful unto death, Jesus promises the victor's crown of life and exemption from the second death. Jesus lives and He shares eternal life and blessedness in heaven with the believers.

At the final judgement, unbelievers will experience the second death. The first death is the death all will experience. The second death, however, is worse — it is eternal separation from God and torment in the lake of fire, or, hell (Revelation 20,14; 20,8). The devil wants people to believe that there is only the first death. This is a lie. The devil is part of the walking dead and wants to take as many as possible with him into the second death.

Will we find ourselves in tribulation? Jesus says “Yes.” To His disciples Jesus said:

“If they persecuted Me, they shall also persecute you” (John 15,20)

Paul said:

And indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. (2 Timothy 3,12)

Ultimately, though, all persecution comes from the devil.

A teenager may want to live a Christian life, but because of circumstances may not fit in with the right crowd, may be bullied, may feel opportunities limited. Then the devil comes to sow seeds of doubt, use others to question a belief in Jesus, try show that drugs may alleviate suffering, or even offer suicide as a way out. Jesus says “No.” Jesus says: “Tribulations will not last.” “I love you so much that I gave My life for you.” “I have forgiven you and will help you carry the burden.”

An adult may have an illness that does not go away. The devil will try to sow doubt. So-called Christians may say that God's will is for all to get better and if you do not your faith is at fault. These false teachers are a synagogue of Satan. Jesus says: "Tribulations will not last." "I love you so much that I gave My life for you." "I have forgiven you and will help you carry the burden."

Tribulation and persecution may be harsher. A number of years ago, in Indonesia three Christian school girls were decapitated because they were Christians. In Iraq, Christians are regularly killed because they are Christians. But this is nothing new. After John died the first bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, was burned alive because he would not say "The emperor is Lord" and sacrifice to the emperor. To these and all other persecution and tribulation, Jesus says: "Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life."

Conclusion. Remember that expression: Short term pain for long term gain? According to Jesus, all tribulation and its corresponding burden is but short term.

In the short term if we find ourselves stumbling, let us turn to Jesus, repent, ask forgiveness, and be set right on the long term road, the road to life eternal. Jesus has defeated sin, death, and the devil. They may try to trick us. But remember: Jesus is the Victor! Long term gain is life eternal. Jesus has gone through all the short term tribulation the world can afflict us with, but in the end He has emerged triumphant. He forgives us to share His triumph: "Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life." Amen.

Now, the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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