

SEVEN - SMYRNA

Ash Wednesday - *“remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”*

Psalm 90:12: *“Teach us to realize the brevity of life, so that we may grow in wisdom.”*

And we won't be doing our version of Ash Wednesday tonight, but we'll be looking at a Church in Smyrna in Revelation 2 that will spark some of the same reflection, as a part of our sermon series that's taking is all the way to Easter.

We're in a series called **Seven** - *You've got mail from Jesus*
looking at 7 letters to 7 churches in 7 cities in Revelation.

SMYRNA - READ LETTER – REVELATION 2:8-11

We get our portrait of Jesus unique to this letter:
“the one who is the First and the Last, who was dead but is now alive.”

We don't worship a dead man
If the resurrection is false, Christianity is worthless.
If the resurrection is true, it is priceless.

This picture of Jesus dead and risen again would have been uniquely meaningful to Smyrna. The city of Smyrna had been conquered and sacked in 600 BC and it laid desolate until it was rebuilt three hundred years later.

It became known as the City that had died and come back to life.
Its common symbol was a **phoenix**, a symbol of resurrection.
And here is the emerging church, worshipping one who had actually resurrected –
“who was dead but is now alive.”

The Greek meaning of Smyrna actually means **“City of Myrrh.”** It produced a ton of Myrrh. Myrrh historically is an embalming fluid, because it kills bacteria and parasites.

...this is also what made it an awkward gift for baby Jesus.
It was prophetically filling, as his death was pleasing in that it satisfied the wrath of God.
The Church in Smyrna - this city of Myrrh - was sharing in the suffering of Christ.

Hebrews 2:10 - *For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering.*

Many in Smyrna walked this path of suffering that he blazed.
Polycarp - while the Romans were preparing to burn him at the stake, Polycarp said:
“For 86 years I have served Christ and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my king, who saved me?”

Smyrna followed the footsteps of Jesus much like Polycarp did, even in suffering and death. Following Jesus is kind of the point. And they were most dedicated to it.

And maybe that's why in this, the shortest letter, we don't get a formal commendation and correction. But the biggest commendation is the reality that there is zero correction – only encouragement.

At the heart of this letter to Smyrna is their present reality:
“I know your afflictions and your poverty.”

In terms of their poverty he says *“but you are rich!!”* They were poor materially, but rich in Christ – with salvation, and the hope of Heaven, where a victor's crown awaited them.

Affliction... can you spin that positively?
These three words would have hit: ***“You will suffer...”***

This letter serves us in three ways. First...

PREPARED WITH EXPECTATION

Parenting a child, but especially adopted ones from unstable backgrounds, means you have to account for fear and inappropriate reactions when they face a new and challenging situation. You set them up to succeed by providing a script so they know how to handle themselves. The script builds in expectations before they step into a situation. It removes the fear.

Jesus' chief advice for the Church in Smyrna is found in verse 10 – “don't be afraid.” So what does he do? Jesus, in effect, walks out some of **parenting 101** – You can save yourself a headache by setting expectations ahead of time.

And we, God's children, would do well to consider these three words – ***you will suffer.*** While the extent varies and few experience suffering and persecution like the Church in Smyrna, some suffering is visible while other suffering is hidden... some suffering is emotional while other is physical... These three words are reality. We will suffer this side of Heaven.

But suffering is a reality we avoid.
I believe this is the primary reason we handle personal suffering poorly.
We can be such crummy comforters for others.
There's **the cheerleader** who irritatingly tries to keep all things positive -- grin and bear it.
There's **the accuser** who assumes the suffering must be caused by stepping out of God's will.
There's **the divine masochist** who all but encourages the sufferer to rejoice over the actual pain.
There's **the super Christian** who believes healing would come if you just had more faith.

Sometimes we simply need to hurt with those who hurt and mourn with those who mourn, rather than scratch this itch to explain the pain away or give it a quick exit.

I'm convinced we do this because we forget the many ways the Bible – and Jesus himself – sets our expectations. Like all the letters to the Churches, Jesus says let everyone with ears to hear, hear this. We need to hear this letter.

Of all Jesus promises, the one we name and claim the least is the one to his disciples:
“You will have trouble.” (this is “You will suffer” packaged a little differently)

And yet the other promises laced throughout this passage in John, the second half of chapter 16:

We will have peace.

We will have abundant joy.

But it will be found while navigating trouble, not avoiding it.

I’m convinced when we lack peace or joy in troubling seasons it is because we think trouble shouldn’t be here. If it’s here something is wrong. So we become obsessed with the **WHY**.

It’s here because we are missing the mark.

God is off the job.

Or we just lack the requisite faith to experience breakthrough and deliverance.

We’ve forgotten trouble is the norm this side of eternity. It’s expected.

This letter hands us four expectations:

The Devil will test you...

You will suffer...

I will give you the crown of life...

You will not be harmed by the second death...

Healthy expectation: The enemy is active. You will have trouble. Jesus has overcome the world.

PERFECTED THROUGH SUFFERING

I don’t think it’s coincidence here in Rev 2 that the only two churches to be commended by Jesus with no correction are the two churches experiencing the most suffering - Smyrna + Philadelphia

There was a poll a long time ago of the elderly in Britain. It asked the question **“What was the happiest period of your life?”** 60% answered **The Blitz**, a period in 1940 when Germany bombed London for 57 consecutive nights.

Their explanation is they learned to rally as a people, they learned courage, sharing, and hope.

Would they have asked for that suffering? Not in a million years.

Yet it was the season in their life that they pointed to as the **HAPPIEST**.

John Ortberg did a similar but broader survey of thousands of people and asked them various questions about their walk with God and growth spiritually. On the question of what contributed to their growth the most – the overwhelming #1? **Seasons of suffering.**

Here in Smyrna is a church that was enduring suffering and had grown into a body of believers above reproach. There isn’t any correction given. Only encouragement.

This doesn’t turn us into divine masochists... seeking out suffering.

James 1:2 - doesn’t say rejoice THAT suffering come.

It simply says WHEN it comes, don’t let it steal your joy. Consider it an *opportunity for joy*.

Romans 5:3 – *we can rejoice too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop...*

But growth through suffering or pain isn't automatic.
How do we grow?

Reform the question...
Replace "why?" with "to what end?"

Why looks back at the reason. To what end look forward at our response.
Reason is God's domain. Response is our assignment.
The Bible's emphasis is on our response, not the cause.

Our first impulse and response in suffering is often to pray "**Comfort me.**"
That's a good prayer. Jesus himself said if possible remove this cup of suffering.
2 Corinthians 1:3 says God is our merciful father and the source of all comfort.

But arguably a more important and less prayed prayer than comfort me is: "**Conform me.**"
Romans 8 says we are created to be conformed to his image, likeness, & righteousness

Even Jesus grew through suffering...
Hebrews 5:8 – *He learned obedience from the things he suffered.*
Why would we be exempt?

Romans 8:17-18
if indeed we share in his sufferings... we may also share in his glory... I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

PROMOTED IN RESURRECTION

The 19th century minister Robert Murray M'Cheyne put it this way: "***To manage a life of pain, as a believer in Jesus, remember: This is all the hell you will ever bear.***"

In managing our expectations....
"If you remain faithful even when facing death, I will give you the crown of life."

But Jesus smashes and redirects expectations here as he does in the beatitudes.
Great is your reward... where? Here?
No. In Heaven.
Will you necessarily get a reward here on earth? No.
Will it be worth it eternally? Yes.

Everything won't always be redeemed in this life.
When Jesus says you will have trouble... but take heart...
I've overcome this troubles. That would make sense.
But it's much bigger.

I've overcome the world.

I believe that means sometimes we don't see it this side of eternity.

Until we graduate from this world.

We will graduate to redemption when we too taste resurrection.

But delayed gratification isn't exactly our culture's strength.

How much more a view for after this life.

And in our culture it is easy for an American Christian of the middle or upper or even lower class to read about persecution ending in death and skim over it. It seems irrelevant to our situation.

Sheep Among Wolves - A movie about the persecuted church of the Middle East.

Burner phones aren't just for Jason Bourne, they are for born again believers across the world.

Church membership questions include - "what do you want me to do if the secret police come and torture you, what do you want me to do?"

"The only way I can experience that moment and not crack and not bow, like Daniel didn't bow and his friends didn't bow to the statue, is to think about the age to come. If I think about that at that moment then what's one day of death, what's ten days of torture.. what's all that compared to eternity?"

These are questions that we rarely if ever ask ourselves as American Christians.

"One of the biggest things that working with the persecuted has made me think about... is what is my price?"

Where or what or with who is my price? Is money my price?

Is the ones that I love my price? Is my friends my price?

Is the ministry at large my price? What's your price?"

If the resurrection is false, Christianity is worthless.

If the resurrection is true, it is priceless.

If we are one day promoted in resurrection and step into Jesus' arms...

what is worth sacrificing that?

What is (fill in the blank) compared to eternity?

But in our society that avoids thinking about death

And is consumed with HERE and NOW...

We echo the words of Ash Wednesday:

"From dust you came, to dust you will return."

It's not an insult. It's an invitation.

Jesus meets us in the dirt. God doesn't expect us to make it to the top of some ladder.

He meets us at the foot of the cross.

What's your price framed another way is what is your value?

Jesus dying on the cross showed you're priceless in his eyes.