

October 16, 2022
I press on ...
Revelation 2:8-11

This is the season of the year when we give thanks. We all have much for which to be thankful. We have BIG things about which we can be thankful: God's love, our salvation through Jesus, His presence day-by-day. We have so many everyday blessings to be thankful for, too, which we often just take for granted: our family, country, food, friends, job, health care, homes, pensions, educational opportunities, church, freedom, clothing, city, transportation, security, savings accounts, schools, recreation opportunities, emergency services, life experiences, and so much more ...

It's good to pause. To count our blessings. To take stock of how God has been faithful to us. Then, when times get tough, we can hold on to those blessings and be strong. Knowing God has been with us in the past, we can face the future with courage ...

Let's be honest. Things aren't always rosy. We have problems. Our issues may not be the same as those followers of Jesus had in Revelation 2-3. But they are problems.

Welcome to Smyrna – where life gets tough

The second church Jesus addresses in Revelation 2 is in Smyrna. With a deep, sheltered harbour, Smyrna rivaled Ephesus as the major commercial city in Asia. It was unrivalled in its loyalty to Rome. Today, Smyrna (now named Izmir) is a city of 3 million (similar to Toronto). Smyrna was one of the wealthiest cities in the ancient world, but Jesus says, *"I know about your suffering and your poverty ..."* (2:9). Jesus is honest. Life can be difficult.

We don't always hear that message in Christian circles. Sometimes we get the impression that, if we put our faith in Jesus, everything will be wonderful. Jesus doesn't promise that.

These believers suffer. In the First Century, Roman emperors insisted everyone worship them as gods. They built temples to themselves in major towns, including Smyrna. Each loyal subject was required to offer incense to the emperor's image, saying, "Caesar is my Lord." Followers of Jesus refused. Jesus was their Lord. In ultra-loyal-to-Rome Smyrna, that refusal had serious consequences. Followers of Jesus were traitors to Rome.

On top of that, in Smyrna a Jewish minority were out to get them. In those days, Jesus and His followers were considered heretics, a movement to be destroyed (In Acts 9, for instance, *"Saul was uttering threats with every breath and was eager to kill the Lord's followers ... He wanted to bring followers of Jesus – both men and women – back to Jerusalem in chains."*) Ouch.

Within a few decades of this letter, Polycarp, the 86-year-old bishop of Smyrna, will be arrested for his faith. The Roman proconsul had pity on the old man and urged him to say simply, "Caesar is my Lord." If Polycarp says this and offers a small pinch of incense to

Caesar's statue, he will escape torture and death. Polycarp responds: *"Eighty-six years I have served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King and Savior? You threaten me with a fire that burns for a season, and after a little while is put out; but you are ignorant of the fire of everlasting punishment prepared for the wicked."*

Polycarp will be burned alive at the stake, then stabbed with a spear when the fire failed to consume his body. Smyrna was a tough town in which to follow Jesus. At his execution, Polycarp prayed: *"I bless you, Father, for judging me worthy of this hour, so that in the company of the martyrs I may share the cup of Christ."* Could I have prayed like that?

In a prosperous city, followers of Jesus suffer poverty as well. Many Christians were slaves (poor by definition). Some of Jesus' followers may have given self-sacrificially to help others. Some may have missed opportunities to get jobs, contracts, or promotions by refusing to worship the emperor. And some believers' homes may have been ransacked. If you want to talk about real discrimination, talk to believers in Smyrna in the 1st Century.

The author of Hebrews comments, *"Think back on those early days when you first learned about Christ. Remember how you remained faithful even though it meant terrible suffering. Sometimes you were exposed to public ridicule and were beaten, and sometimes you helped others who were suffering the same things. You suffered along with those who were thrown into jail, and when all you owned was taken from you, you accepted it with joy. You knew there were better things waiting for you that will last forever"* (Hebrews 10:32-34). That probably described the situation in Smyrna as well.

We may find ourselves in hard places, too. Of course, our "suffering" is nothing like that of people in John's day or believers in the Middle East, North Africa, China, or other nations today. But we have problems and challenges that are very real. It may be health issues. Family issues. Work (or unemployment) issues. Mental health issues. The loss of a loved one. Following Jesus can be tough.

How do we carry on?

Jesus says His people in Smyrna, ***"Don't be afraid"*** of what you are about to suffer. *The devil will throw some of you into prison to test you. You will suffer for ten days. But if you **remain faithful** even when facing death, I will give you the crown of life"* (2:10). God emphasizes, *"Don't be afraid ... be faithful ..."* (2:10). The constant refrain of Scripture is, *"Don't be afraid ..."* The call to follow Jesus is a call to faith and courage ...

- a. Be encouraged. Jesus is in control.** Notice who this letter is from. Yes, it is from Jesus. But how is Jesus described? He is *"the One who is the First and the Last, who was dead but is now alive"* (2:8). Jesus is the beginning and end, unchangeable. all-powerful. Before we were born, He was. While we live, He is. After we die, He will be. When we're afraid, He is with us. Bad things happen, but within limits (2:10). Ultimately, He gets us through. He was dead, but rose again, destroying the power of evil, once, for all, forever. He has done and continues to do great things. He who is in us is greater than he (Satan) who is in the world (1 John 4:4).

- b. Be encouraged. He is all-knowing.** He reminds us, *"I know your afflictions"* (2:9). Isn't it wonderful to know God cares and understands? *"Since he himself has gone through suffering and testing, he is able to help us when we are being tested ... He understands our weaknesses, for he faced all the same testings we do"* (Hebrews 2:15, 4:15). He meets us in the specific circumstances of each of our lives ... bringing just the right help, healing, and hope ...
- c. Be encouraged. He is purposeful.** When Paul writes, *"in all things God works for the good of those who love him,"* he is NOT saying God causes all things, but that God can bring blessing out of all circumstances (Romans 8:28).
- d. Be encouraged. He is generous.** God's riches are different from ours. It is possible to be relatively poor in material things and yet be rich in terms of what matters most in life (relationship with God, relationships with other people). There are poor rich people and rich poor people. Folks in Smyrna appeared poor, but in reality, were rich in terms of what really mattered: a pure relationship with God and genuine love for one another (the issue in Ephesus – Revelation 2:4). Be thankful.

It still may not pay (financially) to follow Jesus. As God's people, we are called to balanced lives, giving time to our families and to God (a quality of life emphasizing the importance of relationships and non-material things). We are called to standards of honesty and integrity that may cause us to pass on some sketchy profits and forego some iffy business opportunities. We give tithes and offerings to God to build the Kingdom of God and help others. As a result, we may not be as "rich," in terms of our portfolios, as we could be.

Jesus' message to His church is that those of us who live our faith, with integrity and generous hearts, are not poor at all. *"I know about your suffering and your poverty – **but you are rich!**"* (2:9). We may not have vast investments, but we may, in fact, be the richest people on earth. Our wealth may not be a bursting bank account, but the life, love, joy, peace, hope, and contentment Jesus brings.

Some of the most content, joyful, blessed people I know are not necessarily financially wealthy. They are rich in terms of their relationships with God and with other people. In contrast, some of the financially wealthy people I know are not necessarily happy, content, or at peace at all. They can be downright miserable.

We need to rethink our categories of "rich" and "poor," framing them more in terms of quality of life and less in terms of quantity of money. Paul says: *"True godliness with contentment is itself great wealth. After all, we brought nothing with us when we came into the world, and we can't take anything with us when we leave it. So if we have enough food and clothing, let us be content. But people who long to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many foolish and harmful desires that plunge them into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. And some people, craving money, have wandered from the true faith and pierced themselves with many sorrows"* (1 Timothy 6:6-10).

How will we finish the race?

When we lived in Edmonton in the 1990's, signs welcoming you to the city announced you were now entering "*Edmonton: The City of Champions.*" Still basking in the afterglow of several Grey Cups and Stanley Cups (remember Ricky Ray, Warren Moon, Wayne Gretzky, Mark Messier, and crew?), Edmonton had a certain sporting swagger. In 2015, after a mediocre run of many not-so glorious seasons, the signs were quietly changed. Now you're welcomed to "*The City of Edmonton: Alberta's Capital City.*" (In fact, the "City of Champions" slogan had nothing to do with sports. It was coined by the mayor to describe the heroic spirit of the city after a devastating tornado ripped through the city in 1987)

Smyrna was famous for its games and athletes – it was the "City of Champions" in Asia. A "crown" or laurel wreath was the trophy awarded to victors (v. 10). Notice what Jesus says to His people in Smyrna: "*Don't be afraid of what you are about to suffer. The devil will throw some of you into prison to test you. You will suffer for ten days. But if you remain faithful even when facing death, I will give you **the crown of life***" (Revelation 2:10).

Paul, in his letter to believers in Philippi, encourages us to keep the faith as well: "*I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us*" (Philippians 3:13-14).

Those of us who simply remain faithful are the real champions. We may not be flashy. Super talented. Hyper-busy. Or over-achieves. But we keep the faith. We keep faithful.

- Life ~~can be~~ IS a long, hard race. What does real "wealth" look like? What are our real priorities? Lots of distractions can take our eyes off Jesus and His grace. How can we keep focused on what matters most?
- There ~~may~~ WILL be times of suffering and hardship. Will we "hit the wall" and give up? Will we keep the faith, despite the challenges, and plod on?
- Will we keep looking ahead? It's tempting to look back, and rest on our laurels. There are still opportunities. God hasn't given up on us. Don't give up on God.
- Will we finish well? Like Polycarp, will we keep the faith till the end?

Last night at about 4:10 am, as I was lying awake and praying, I found my self praying, "*Lord, drive away stress, fear, angst, worry, division, darkness, evil, and pain. And Lord, please usher in love, faith, hope, joy, peace, health, and rest.*" It's not like anything in my life is magically going to change. But my attitude can change. And that will help finish well.