

Revelation 2:8-11

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 19 July 2015

Preacher: John Dunlop

[0:00] Ah, good. Thank you. I will, uh, is the volume okay for you? Good, good. Appreciate everybody showing up on a pretty hot night, but I trust it was a worthwhile time as we worship the Lord and as we go into his word together. Our passage tonight is Revelation 2, verses 8 through 11, nestled in between the passages that were read earlier this evening, page 1029 in your few Bibles.

I'd encourage you to look at it and keep it open before you. We'll be referring to the text back and forth, and I think it'll be helpful to keep your focus on the scriptures there. This is the second of the letters of the Apostle John to the churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3.

Verse 8, and to the angel of the church in Smyrna write the words of the first and the last who died and came to life. I know your tribulation and your poverty, but you are rich, and the slander of those who say that 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 throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto 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. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death. Hope. I think this passage is about hope. One of my father's friends used to say, you can live for 40 days without food, four days without water, four minutes without oxygen, and four seconds without hope. Well, I'm not sure that's true, but it does make a good way to start the sermon. But we all need hope. Tonight, I want to explore with you seven reasons which I find in this passage which give us solid foundation to have a hope, especially if we're facing difficult times. Let's just pray, shall we? Fathers, we're here tonight. Our minds have been busy with many things. Our bodies are kind of hot and somewhat uncomfortable. But Father, I pray that you would clear our minds, cool our bodies, and allow us to hear your voice this evening. Father,

I pray that it not be my voice that we hear, but the word of the Spirit, taking your word and applying it to our individual lives. So be our teacher this evening, we pray. In our Lord Jesus' name, amen.

Now, this brief letter is addressed to the church in Smyrna. Well, first we need to ask, what do we know about that city? Well, we know it was 35 miles north of Ephesus in Turkey, and it was right on the Aegean coast. It was the main seat of emperor worship for that whole area. And on the coast is a coastal city, and a large city. It was probably about 200,000 population. It was a beautiful place.

[4:06] And there was a lot of anti-Christian movement there in Smyrna. But we really don't know much else about the city. What do we know about the church that this letter addresses? Well, here again, we don't know very much. It's not mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament. So all that we know is really what we pick up in the context of the letter that we've read. We can observe that of the seven churches addressed in these letters, Smyrna and Philadelphia were the only two that weren't criticized.

They were apparently doing things well. Well, the church, it seems, is in some way in conflict with those who identified themselves with the Jewish community. And there was a lot of bitter strife going on between those who were Jews in the synagogue and the Christians. The Jews apparently were slandering the Christians, presumably, to get them in trouble with the Roman authorities. And in light of that, the church was entering a time of suffering. For some, it would mean imprisonment. And for some, it would mean death. So even though the church seemed to be doing well in many ways, it was facing a time of great suffering. And they needed encouragement. And that is what I believe John is giving to them in this letter. So we want to look at seven different reasons, I find, to be encouraged and have hope, even in the face of oncoming suffering.

Reason one, did you notice, who is this letter addressed to? It's interesting, isn't it? To the angel of the church of Smyrna. Now, angel means messenger or sent one. Now, we really don't know whether this meant human leadership or whether it meant supernatural powers that were over the church, in other words, angels. We do know that they were in God's hand. And if you'll recall what we read in Revelation chapter 1, where Jesus is standing amidst the lampstands, which are symbols of his churches, he's holding seven stars in his hands. And it says, those are the angels of the seven churches.

So we do know that whether the leadership spoken here is human or supernatural, they were being held in God's hands. And you know, that's a great reason to be encouraged, isn't it? To realize that God, the Lord Jesus, is holding the leadership of his church in his hands.

Second reason for hope that I find here, you'll notice the letter contains the words of he who is the first and the last. You may notice as we go through these letters each week, that each of the seven letters singles out one of the characteristics of Jesus as he's presented to us in chapter 1. So here he is spoken of as the first and the last who died and is alive forevermore.

[7:46] Obviously, the apostle John felt that these particular characteristics of Jesus were very relevant to the church in Smyrna. So we need to explore why. What does it mean that he's the first and the last?

Elsewhere in the book of Revelation, we read that he is the alpha, the first letter of the Greek alphabet, and the omega, the last letter of the Greek alphabet. He goes from the beginning to the end.

Now, it's hard for our human minds to grasp, but God does not move through time the way we do.

For me, this moment is now, and now it's now. And what I said five seconds ago will never be repeated.

I am moving down a timeline, and I am stuck in time. God, however, is not moving through time the way we do.

[8:57] Now, let's think of that in a few other passages. Remember in the book of Exodus, where God appeared to Moses in a burning bush? Moses said, well, who do I tell people you are? And God says, I am who I am.

Present tense. I am the one who exists simply because I exist, and I exist in the present tense. Or one of my favorite psalms is Psalm 90. And Psalm 90, the second verse, says, from everlasting to everlasting, from time eternally past to time eternally future, you are, present tense, God.

Isaiah says it in such a wonderful way. If you look at the King James Version, he speaks of the high and lofty one that inhabits eternity. Most of us have no trouble thinking of God present geographically in all places at one time. But God inhabits eternity. If we think of the timeline that we are moving through from everlasting to everlasting, you are God. You are the first, you are the last, you are the alpha, you are the omega. And Jesus captured it so clearly where he says, before Abraham was, I am. Before Abraham was, I am. So Jesus is the first and the last.

Now, I've thought about this for years. My little brain still doesn't grasp it all. But I think it's true. And the implication of this is that even while I am stuck in time, even while I am moving from moment to moment, God sees the end result.

The one who inhabits eternity looks at the end process. Now, I find that great reason for hope, because God knows the end.

[11:37] Our third reason for hope is that he is the one who died and was raised again from the dead. All of the difficulties we go through in life, I think, when we stop and think about it, are really trumped by the fact that Jesus died and rose again. It makes our problems seem pretty insignificant and gives us great reason for hope. Now, over the years, it's been my job to deliver a lot of bad news to patients. I'm a physician who practices geriatrics. And end-of-life care is kind of where I spend my time. And people tend to come to the end of life, at the end of life.

And we geriatricians sign a lot of death certificates and see a lot of people die. And many times we have to tell them their life's coming to an end, that they're soon going to die.

And I have had the privilege over many years of taking care of a lot of people of deep faith. In my particular practice, probably 70% of my patients were believers.

And honestly, it made such a difference in almost every case when you told someone who was a believer who believed that Jesus died and rose again, that they were going to die, and someone who did not have that foundation for hope.

So there is hope in knowing that Jesus died and rose again. Recall what Paul says in Romans 8, He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

[13:41] If our hope is that Jesus died and rose again, we can have confidence that God will continue to pour his goodness into our lives.

And in that, we have hope. The fourth reason I think we have hope is, recall, you'll see in our passage, he knows our tribulation.

Jesus knows what we are facing at this moment. Now, it's hardly a big tribulation, but it's hot in here. Jesus knows it's hot in here.

He feels with us. And he knows whatever our tribulations are. He is not an uncaring, distant God.

He knows that even while we may have many spiritual blessings, John said, and yet you are rich, some of us really live in poverty.

[14:45] And Jesus knows that. Our poverty does not escape him. He also knows the other struggles that we face in this world where we face much opposition.

So we've had four reasons for hope, which are grounded in this letter. First, God sent one to lead the church, who he holds in his right hand.

He is the first and the last. He's the beginning and the end. He's the one who died and is alive again. And he is well aware of what's going on in our lives.

Solid reasons for hope. Now, we have to ask, is that hope enough when we're facing really tough times, when we know that suffering, imprisonment, and death may be coming?

And that's where John moves in the next section of this letter. I think we will see that even though suffering will come, God is in control and has placed a limit on it.

[16:09] When we see difficulties coming, and the people in the Church of Smyrna saw difficulties coming, one question we have to ask is, who is responsible for the suffering that's coming?

A legitimate question. Before we get into that answer, though, I would like to observe that first, who is not responsible? There's no hint in this letter at all that the Church of Smyrna had done anything to merit their suffering.

The suffering we're talking about in this passage is not a punishment for their sin. They are not responsible. So who is?

Well, I'd like to show you that there are three different responsible parties to their suffering. And this is true, I think, in many cases of suffering today.

On one level, it would come because of the slander brought against the Christians, presumably to the Roman authorities, by, as it said, certain Jews who are not Jews.

[17:22] Now, what does that mean? I'm not sure that's totally clear. But I tend to agree with the Apostle Paul where in Romans 9, he talks about a true Jewish person is a child of Abraham by faith, not by genetics.

There were evidently people in the synagogue at Smyrna who were working against the Christians who were Jewish by physical descent, but they were not children of Abraham by faith.

Therefore, John says, they're not really true Jews. These were the ones who you could say, yeah, those guys, they're responsible for the suffering that's to come.

But I think there's another level here which the passage makes very clear, and that is, they were motivated and driven by Satan himself.

The suffering that was coming was an act of Satan to do that. Now, we know that Satan is active and powerful.

[18:35] We read in 1 Peter 5, be sober-minded, be watchful. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

Satan is powerful. He's clever. He has great ability to destroy Christians. But the second thing we need to keep in mind is Satan has been defeated.

In his death, Jesus assured that Satan would never succeed. He was doomed. So in Hebrews 2, we read that through death, he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil.

Now, am I talking out of both sides of my mouth here? Well, maybe I am. But I think there's good reason for it. How can we say that Satan is defeated and yet at the same time talk about him having so much power?

A little hard to explain. But over the years, I've come to realize that the best analogy I can come up with is back in World War II. I think every historian of World War II, would say that Hitler was defeated and doomed as soon as the Allies landed at Normandy at D-Day.

[19:56] The end of the story was told. But it took another whole year of hard fighting, marching through the fields of the lowlands, through France and into Germany, before Hitler would finally surrender.

He was doomed at D-Day. He was finally defeated a year later. And perhaps that's a little bit of analogy of how Satan is today.

He was doomed at the cross, but his final defeat is yet to come. And in the meantime, we are still waging that war. So there's two levels of responsibility.

One, the Jews who were slandering the Christians. Two, Satan who was working through them. But there's a third level here that I think we have to realize.

And that is, who controls Satan? And I would propose that we see in this text that it is God that controls Satan.

[21 : 03] And God is ultimately in control. But why do I say that? First, note how it talks of this suffering is a test. Tests come from God.

God wants to test his people, not to make us fail, but primarily to show us that by his grace we will succeed. First Peter 4 says, Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you as though something strange were happening to you.

But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's suffering that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. The second reason I see Satan is controlled by God is where it says that the suffering will be strictly limited to ten days.

Satan does not have unlimited authority. Now we see that oftentimes through scripture. Remember the book of Job. God allowed Satan to test Job but put very strict restrictions on how much he could do.

Last winter you were studying through the book of Samuel in the service. Do you remember how it spoke of Saul being afflicted by an unholy spirit sent by the Lord?

[22 : 32] Very interesting. How many of you can think of any time when Jesus was on earth and was commanding demonic presence to exercising a demonic presence from someone from someone who's possessed by a demon?

Do you ever remember the demon saying, no sir, I don't think I will leave now sir, thank you. I think I'll just stay here. No. Jesus had full control over those demonic presences.

In the book of 1 Corinthians, Paul tells them to deal with a man who's been living in sin and says, deliver this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh so that his spirit may be saved.

He's giving Satan the job to eventually end up in this man's salvation. Or Paul spoke of his thorn in the flesh as a quote, messenger of Satan.

And what was the result of that messenger of Satan? that he would grow in his own dependence on God, recognize his weakness, and that his strength was actually in his weakness.

[23 : 54] So in all of these examples, I think we see God using Satan to accomplish his ultimate purpose. So we have great courage from 1 John when it says, he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

And God equips his people with the ability to counter the efforts of Satan. So our fifth reason for hope is God is ultimately in control.

Satan does not have absolute sway. Now we move outside of this passage into its larger context for our next two reasons for hope.

But I had them read, Kelly, read Revelation 1 to remember that beautiful picture of Jesus standing among his church, the lampstands, holding the angel of the church, the stars in his hand, and this beautiful, powerful, loving Savior is where the church begins.

Great reason for hope. And where is the church going? Revelation 4, Revelation 5, where the believers from all the ages are gathered around the throne worshipping God and the Lord Jesus.

[25 : 23] That's where we're going. Now, it's fascinating that between where we start and where we end are these seven churches not always presenting a very encouraging picture.

Some of them beset by Satan, some of them suffering, some of them losing their first love, some of them growing cold. Not a real nice picture.

But when you see where it comes from, where you see where the church is going, there's great reason for hope. So, I think we have seven reasons in this passage for hope, even as we face the difficulties in life.

God specifically sends his leaders to be over his church. Jesus is the first and the last. He sees the end result. Jesus died and rose again.

Jesus knows our struggles in life. Satan, though our enemy, is limited and controlled by God. Jesus, in all his glory, stands among his churches and the destiny of the church will be fulfilled as we stand around his throne in glory.

[26 : 42] So, in light of these seven reasons for hope, how should we respond? John gives us two ways. First, be faithful, press on to the end.

be faithful unto death. And second, he who has an ear, let him hear. We are to listen to what the Spirit of God says.

We are to be in the Scriptures. We are to be in the public preaching of the Word. We are to be enmeshed in the Word of God, listening to it and obeying it.

That is our response to hope. How does God respond? Well, we are given two ways. First, he gives the crown of life to those who persevere.

And second, he protects us from the second death, which is eternal separation from God, his love and goodness. Remind us that there are two options, eternal life in God's presence or eternal death of separation from him.

[27 : 52] Fifteen hundred years earlier, Moses wrote, I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse.

Therefore, choose life. Jesus, the one who stands among his churches, the one who died and rose again, the one who is in control of all things of this life, even the really difficult things, offers eternal life.

If we reject his offer, the default will be the second death. It's a choice we all must make. And when we have choose life, we have every reason for hope.

Let's pray. Amen. Father, as we look at our lives, we struggle at times. Father, Satan is active in our lives.

The difficulties of this world can be overwhelming at times. But Lord, we are grateful that you give us great reason for hope.

[29 : 09] Father, I pray that we would each be encouraged. For those of us who have chosen life, listen to your word and obey it. Father, we have the hope of eternal future.

Father, for those who have never really come to that point and have never really chosen to follow you, they have the hope that we share if they would only make that choice.

So we thank you for the hope that we have and pray that we would be faithful to it. We pray this for our own good and for your glory.

Amen. the three months ago now.