

To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. ⁹ I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰ Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death. (Revelation 2:8-11)

Don't be Afraid

What are you afraid of? Snakes? Rats? Clowns? How about health problems? How do you feel about surgery? Most of you know that I had a hernia surgery earlier this year. It was the second time in five years. I wasn't afraid exactly, but I wasn't really looking forward to it either. I do have a routine colonoscopy scheduled for later this year. I'll be honest, the idea that they might find something in that test does scare me just a little bit. There are lots of things in life that scare us. We parents have all kinds of fears for our children: they'll run out in front of a car, they'll get mixed up with the wrong kids and start doing drugs, they'll make bad choices and suffer a lot of pain and sorrow as a result. Sometimes, those fears keep us up at night. I think the presidential election this year is stoking fears of people everywhere on the political spectrum. Many of us fear public speaking or going to job interviews or making tough decisions. I bet I could fill my entire allotted time this morning just listing things that we fear. Jesus speaks to us about the things that make life scary this morning. He says, **"Don't be afraid."**

I.

Now, the main thing that Jesus was talking about in this little letter to the church in the Greek city of Smyrna was fear of persecution. This congregation was already facing it and it was going to continue. But finally, all the hurts and sorrows of this life come from the same source: sin. So it's fitting that the Savior from sin should reassure us today. **Don't be afraid. Jesus knows what we face.**

He knew that the Christians in Smyrna were facing afflictions and poverty. He mentions the slanders of people who said they were Jews but were really a synagogue of Satan. What does that mean? From God's perspective, true Jews share the faith of Abraham, faith in Christ. So those people who were of Jewish descent but who rejected Christ were really followers of the devil. Now those ethnic Jews didn't rule this Greek city. But they could engage in a whispering campaign. They could accuse Christians of belonging to an illegal religion and twist their teachings. They lied to make the congregation look bad. Jesus said, **"Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days."** It was working! Things were going to get worse! Some of them were going to get thrown in jail just for confessing their faith in Jesus. Jesus said they were about to suffer. It was going to hurt. They were going to shed tears and want it to be over.

That is the way life is here. We all have afflictions. Thanks be to God, Christians aren't being thrown in jail for their faith in America, at least not yet. But there's more than just a whispering campaign going on against us. The world openly mocks our beliefs. It's getting harder and harder to stand up for the truth. One part of the problem is somewhat like the "so-called Jews" problem the early church had. There are lots of so-called Christian theologians out there attacking what God actually says. They paint us as extremists. Even if it never gets us thrown into prison, it does make life harder.

But that's not the only thing we face. Jesus talks about poverty. Again, by God's grace, we're citizens of a rich country and we're blessed in many ways. Yet, it's also true that real wages haven't risen for most of us in years. The costs of owning a car, of owning a house, of raising and educating children are going up. The stress of meeting our financial obligations never seems to come down. Finally, life still hurts. It's always going to. Every time I make a hospital call, every time I visit one of our members who can no longer get to church, every time I sit down with someone who has lost someone or whose marriage has ended or who's struggling with any one of a thousand things, I see this truth. You see it, too.

When pain and sorrow are looming in our lives, it's natural for us to be afraid. But Jesus tells us, "Don't be afraid." When he says that, he's not rebuking our lack of faith or our human weakness. He's reassuring us, like a mom or dad who holds a small child during a thunder storm and gently whispers to them, "Don't be afraid. The storm can't hurt you. Don't be afraid. I'm here to take care of you." Jesus tells us not to be afraid, first of all, because we are rich. No matter how poor we get here, no matter how hard it is to make our house payments, no matter how much less we have than everyone else around us, we are rich because we have him. We are rich because we have eternal life where we will have more than we could ask for or imagine. We are rich because the God who owns the universe thinks about us constantly and does all things for our good – even when he takes things away from us here.

Jesus tells us not to be afraid of the lies of supposed experts and theologians who attack our faith. They don't speak for him. His word is clear and plain. He tells us not to be afraid of the hurts and sorrows in our lives. Their purpose is to test our faith. That doesn't mean that God is trying to find out if it's really there or not. He knows it's there. It means that he's pushing it and exercising it so that it will be stronger and more certain. He's flexing it so that doubt disappears and we have an inner confidence that nothing can shake.

Most of all, he tells us not to be afraid because he knows our afflictions. He understands how much they hurt. All by itself, having someone who knows and understands comforts us. But there's even more to it. He knows we need help. He gives us the strength to stand and even conquer all that terrifies us here. He has the power to rescue us even in this life. How do we know that's true? Jesus calls himself, "**the First and the Last.**" He's God. Jesus was there before the world began and he will still be there when the world ends. You and I will only continue to exist after the world ends because God made us and he will keep us alive with him. So Jesus, the Son of God, has the power to address every hurt we face.

Jesus also calls himself the one "**who died and came to life again.**" He knows what life is really like because he lived it. He went even farther than we have gone in facing pain and sorrow. He died. We haven't done that yet. Jesus died and he came to life again. He conquered death for us. In the process, he paid for all our sin, the cause of our death and also of all that we suffer here. He paid for all the times that we made bad choices and suffered as a result. So he can set us free from the results of our own sin. He died and paid for all the sin of all the world, for all the causes of all hurt and sorrow. When the time is right, he will free us from all pain and sorrow. So right now, we can trust that he is doing everything for our good. And we can trust that he will watch over us and hear our prayers. He will rescue us from what hurts and scares us. He will never leave us or forsake us. He will hold our hand in every hurt and disaster and he will bring us home.

II.

That really is the final and greatest promise Jesus made to the church in Smyrna. He recorded that promise for us to hear. Why do you think he did that? Why does Jesus let us overhear that promise? Because it wasn't just for them. It was for us, too. **Don't be afraid. Jesus will give us a crown of life.**

When Jesus warned them of what was coming, he said "**The devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days.**" What did he mean by "ten days"? Jesus was not saying that the length of time they'd be in jail or the time that the persecution would run would be ten literal days. The book of Revelation uses numbers in a symbolic way. He was saying that it would last as long as God had determined. God is in charge. He does not let the devil touch us until he says it's OK. And he only lets him touch us for as long as he determines. Now, why would he ever let the devil touch us? Because his primary goal is to get us to heaven. Sometimes, we need to hurt to get there. God uses pain to teach us that the things of this life are not as important as we think they are. He shows us that having all the money in the world won't make cancer go away. He demonstrates that having what we thought was a Christian country does not mean that we can create a paradise on earth where everyone obeys the word of the Lord. He teaches us not to worship any blessing here. Pain shows us how weak and temporary even the best this life can offer really is.

Jesus also uses hurt and sorrow to teach us to grab on to him. He shows us how powerless we are. We can't make our bodies heal. We can't make other people treat us better. We can't improve the economy or change the way our society thinks or end strife and violence. We have to cling to Jesus our Savior when life hurts. That lesson then teaches us to cling to Jesus every day, even when life doesn't hurt. He tells us the hurt is only temporary. Most of us will outlive most of the specific challenges we face. Sometimes, we can even look back and see blessings that God worked out of those sorrows. But even if the hurt was so bad that we will never understand here what God was really doing, in heaven we will. Even if the only way for some pain to

stop is for us to leave this life, that pain will stop. Either Jesus will call us home or he will return, and all the sorrows of this life will be over.

When Jesus comes back, the dead will rise and the living believers will be transformed. And we will live with him forever. Jesus promises us, **“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.”** What is the second death? It’s hell. That doesn’t mean that people in hell are unconscious or that they will be burned up and then gone. Hell lasts forever and those who are in torment there will experience it forever. It will be so bad that you can’t call it life. It’s death, a kind of living death. It’s death also because true life is being with God. In hell, sinners are separated from him and his love forever.

That isn’t going to happen to us. We aren’t going to be on the outside, looking in, wishing that we could have even a little taste of heaven. We won’t be like the rich man in Jesus’ parable for today who longed just for a sip of water. We will be like Lazarus with Jesus in perfect joy forever. After the resurrection, we will live in a new and perfect world. I wish I could describe that world for you, but you know what? I’ve never seen it! Neither has anyone else in this life. So the best we can do is think of going back to the Garden of Eden. God will supply every joy. God will wipe away every tear that we ever shed. God will take away all that hurts and all that frightens us and we will live with him forever. That promise conquers fear here and now. Don’t be afraid.

In the years since God has given my wife and me children, we’ve never lived close to any of our relatives. So we’ve always relied on visits. They come to us or we go to them. No matter how much time we dedicate to that, it’s never enough. It always ends way too quickly. This summer, my wife’s sister came with her kids to visit us. On the day they left, her little daughter cried because she’s old enough to know what leaving means. Her mom comforted her by telling her that we were coming in just a couple weeks to visit them. That helped. In this life, it often feels like we’re separated from Jesus. We certainly don’t get to see him with our physical eyes. More than sorrow, that makes us afraid. But Jesus tells us that he is with us. He promises us that the day is coming when we will see him face to face. We will enjoy the warmth of his love forever. That is the source of our courage while we face all that this life does to us. We are going home. We will wear the crown of eternal life with Christ forever. Amen.