

Visions From Heaven
- A Study Of “Revelation” -

“Simply Enduring”

Bible Reading:

Revelation 2: 8-11; 3: 7-13

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Every four years a process is started which involves a lot of wining, dining, presenting and politicking. It is the process of trying to become the one city in the world considered worthy of hosting the Olympic games. Every four years there is one city that goes crazy with joy, and several others that come away disappointed and empty-handed.

Toronto has been on the losing end a couple of time. Vancouver is in the midst of a competition for upcoming Winter games.

We are not the first to witness these types of inter-city competitions. I take you back to the year 26BC and the city of Smyrna. The people there are walking around with smiles equally as large as any from Atlanta. For you see they have just been awarded the rights to become the Roman empire's only center of emperor worship. They, more than any other place - and the competition had been fierce - had been considered the most loyal and the most prosperous to Rome.

It was an immense honour for this rich and beautiful city, and in the years that followed they were determined to do everything in their power to protect this honour. So it was that when a sect called Christians appeared and refused to worship the emperor, the city officials took a very dim view of things and made life difficult for believers.

Smyrna also had a large and active Jewish population. They, even more than the city officials, had no use for those calling themselves followers of Christ. And these Jews did whatever they could with harassment and gossip and rumors and legal challenges to push Christianity out of Smyrna.

Due east of Smyrna was the city of Philadelphia, also a wealthy city. It was a strong trading center, through which caravans would travel on their way to Rome. A church existed in Philadelphia, as in Smyrna. And, as in Smyrna, there was also an active synagogue of Jews who hated and persecuted those Christians.

So it was that Christ had John write letters to these two suffering churches. In both cases they are strong letters of support. There is no discouragement, no anger, no rebuke to be found in them. And it is by reading these letters that we in the Church today can find encouragement for our lives.

Writes Christ to Smyrna: "*I know your afflictions and your poverty.*"

Of the afflictions we have already spoken. That came especially from the Jews. These were the same sorts that had hassled the apostle Paul throughout his ministry. We read of examples from the book of Acts. Luke writes of Paul being driven out of Pisidean Antioch, chased to Iconium and Lystra, where his Jewish opponents caught up to him and stoned him. The Jews also caused a riot against Paul in Thesselonica, and opposed him viciously in Corinth. It was the Jews who finally had Paul arrested and tried to kill him in Jerusalem.

They carried on in the same manner in Smyrna. Around 150 AD Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, was arrested and put on trial for refusing to bow to Ceasar. It was the local Jews who, when he went into hiding, tipped off the authorities of his whereabouts. It was they who shouted most loudly for his condemnation, and when the verdict was announced that he would be burned at the stake, it was the Jews, history tells us, that were the most eager to gather the sticks for the bonfire.

Our Lord, who sees and knows all things, who even knows what goes on in the secret corners of the hearts of people, also knew what was in the hearts of these Jews and wrote to the Church:

"I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not but are a synagogue of Satan..."

Our Lord knew of the struggles these unbelievers caused for Christians. He knew of their afflictions, and, says v.9, he knew of their poverty. He knew that following him meant renouncing all corrupt ways of life, going straight in business, giving up the shady deals and the crooked but easy roads to profit.

He knew that for them carrying the name Christian meant that some of the most influential businessmen would not trade with them.

Those looking for work would not always get the job, even if most qualified.

They would be pushed to the fringes and suffer for it.

How much would they suffer? Says this letter: rather intensely.

"The devil will put some of you in prison.... you will suffer persecution for ten days.... be faithful even to the point of death..."

What is ten days symbolizing?

A limited time period, a somewhat short one. But intense, nevertheless.

Be ready to go to prison.

Remember, in those days prison was not the place of punishment. It was merely the holding cell prior to sentencing. In other words there would be, after prison, a good chance of death, often cruel death.

One of the marks by which true believers can be identified, says the New Testament, is.....

.....Suffering.

There **will** be persecution.

We're told that over and over again.

The final blessing Jesus pronounces, in His sermon on the mount, is to those -

who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. Blessed are you when men shall revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you. (MT 5.10-12)'

There's an important line included in Luke's account of this teaching:

'Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets. (LK 6.26)'

In the gospel of John we hear these words of Jesus:

'If the world hates you, know that it hated me before it hated you... A servant is no greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you... In the world you shall have tribulation (Jn 15&16).'

And yet, for all this affliction, and all this poverty, Christ reminds the Church of the great eternal reward that is theirs.

John Stott tells us that:

"Smyrna was famous for its arena and its athletic competitions. So the people there would have had no problem imagining the Christian life as a race or a contest. It required diligent training, energy, and strong exertion. The pace would be fast and the going hard. There would be sweat and pain.

BUT

at the end stood he who is the first and the last, who has faced the greatest enemy of death and conquered it, the Victor *par excellence*, and in his life was the trophy, the crown of life, which every conqueror would receive." [Stott 50]

Hear again the promise. "He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death."

Second death.....What is that, you say? I thought dead is dead is dead. Not so.

There are at least two ways we can think of death.

The first way we can think of death is the bodily death we all will have to face, when our souls are separated from our bodies. For believers this is the time when they in the soul state go to heaven.

What the bible calls "the second death" is what happens at the final day when body and soul are reunited. Here all faithful believers, the victors, are taken to a cleansed earth to live forever with Jesus in a resurrected creation - the new heaven and the new earth - while unbelievers will be cast into eternal suffering, forever separated from the merciful presence of God. This is often pictured as a lake of fire, or outer darkness. This

horrible, eternal fate is "the second death." Of all this is the one to be feared most. Of all, this is the one that believers can be completely assured they will never face.

Brothers and sisters, for us in Ottawa the struggles of Smyrna seem far away. Perhaps for believers in the Sudan these circumstances would be more similar.

And yet, for us too, the reminder comes that suffering and faith in Jesus go hand in hand. And so we ought not to be surprised if we end up suffering shame and scorn and slander, and who knows, maybe lost business or employment opportunities, and perhaps jail or worse in years to come because of faith.

The Bible is clear enough in its message that belief in the Lord WILL bring suffering.

And the warning from Jesus in Luke 6 is so strong that I dare say if the road is all smooth and comfortable, and our name is highly esteemed among all our neighbors, maybe we ought to look twice.

Have we been true and uncompromising in our devotion to Jesus?

Having said that, we turn to the letter to the Church in Philadelphia.

Here, too, there was opposition by the so-called "synagogue of Satan," but it seems that persecution was not near as intense.

Which is the other side of the coin.

Scripture itself shows that among the faithful some will suffer much, but others will be spared great persecution.

The apostle James is beheaded. Peter is delivered.

Hebrews 11, the great chapter of faith, shows how some, like Gideon and Samuel and David had great, victorious lives as believers, while other suffered greatly, like Isaiah who was sawn in two.

Smyrna suffered greatly because of her uncompromising stand of devotion to Jesus. Philadelphia was also uncompromising, but was for some reason granted immunity from the terrible persecution.

Not, thought, that she could rest easy.

For to this church comes God's word:

"See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut."

This open door is set there by the one "who holds the key of David."

This is an Old Testament picture - found in Isaiah 22.22 in which the key of the house of David is entrusted to a new steward, Eliakim, as a symbol of his complete control over the royal household and of his authority to grant or refuse access to the king's presence. [G.B.Caird]

Jesus is the one with total authority to allow or disallow entry into the house of the King, into the eternal presence of God Almighty.

Jesus alone can open a door which no one can shut, and close it in such a way that no one can open it.

To Philadelphia he says, "I place before you an **open** door."

Full entrance into the presence of the Lord.

Freely approaching Him without any obstructions.

And then, this promise to these faithful believers –

The promise that those who had been opposing them will one day be shown wrong. One day they will come and bow down before believers.

Here I think of Isaiah 49.6, where we read of Israel being "*a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach the ends of the earth.*"

I think also of Isaiah 43.4 "*I am making them come and do homage at your feet; they shall know that I love you.*"

God's gathered people of faith are His divinely appointed instrument through whom His holy glory and honour would be proclaimed to the world.

In the Old Testament that is Israel. Now it is the New Testament Church - that is the believers at Philadelphia, and believers in Ottawa.

"I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you."

Please understand, this is NOT in the sense of we being proud conquerors and they whimpering at the door, humbled and defeated.

Remember the context from Isaiah.

They are coming and falling down....

....**not** to worship us,

but to **join us** in worshipping the God who has loved us so much that he sent his one and only son; they now see His love and return it to Him.

Our Lord held open a door to the Church at Philadelphia. It was the time of the *pax romana*, the great time of world peace under the rule of Rome. Travel was good. Communication was excellent. And because they had been blessed with no great persecution, the Church at Philadelphia is encouraged to get on with the task to which Christ called all believers,

"Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And surely, I will be with you always to the close of the age." (Mt 28)

Brothers and sisters,

If we have, perhaps, some difficulty finding similarity between ourselves and the believers at Smyrna, we should have no such difficulty finding similarities to the Philadelphian believers.

We have peace. Persecution and resentment and slander - well, occasionally we are subjected to a rude comment, perhaps a look or two. Beyond that, we live in full and rich freedom.

We are richly blessed.

We have some of the most unbelievable communications and travel facilities available.

A door has been thrown wide open, one that no one can shut, except our Saviour.

He has placed an unbelievable missionary opportunity before the Church in Canada. An open door, wide open. And we are to make use of it.

Remember our congregation's mission statement?

As members of a community that seeks to glorify God, we commit to bring the life changing message of Christ to our neighbors as well as to each other.

That's what we say.

Do our actions match?

Twice a year our regional assembly of Classis Eastern Canada meets, and every time we have to answer the question

"Are you diligently engaging and promoting the work of evangelism."

In other words, "are you diligently making use of that open door which Christ has set before you?"

So.....

Are we.....

....really?

In my previous congregation someone hung this sign over the exit -

"You are now entering the Mission Field!"

I don't know how long the church here will enjoy the great legal freedoms it does. But while we do, are we using them to further the kingdom and spread the gospel?

That has to be central to our reason for existence.
Especially in this time of peace.

There is a second death coming.

We are called to proclaim the road of freedom away from it.

We are called to urge people to faith.

And we are called to help them hang in there with that faith, and to hang on ourselves so that one day we, and they, may join together in membership of the New Jerusalem, the new heaven and new earth.

History tells us that much of the early church in Asia and Africa became complacent after the first few centuries. They lost their missionary zeal. The Muslims moved in and the Christian faith was crushed in most places. They, because of complacency, could not hold on to what they had.

But the church at Philadelphia stayed strong and remained a faithful witness to her Lord long after the entire area was muslim.

May we too be found with that faith, AMEN.