

Reigniting the Flame: Trials Revelation 2:8-11

I. Introduction

Last week, we started a seven-week sermon series based on the seven letters found in Revelation. If you missed last week, I strongly encourage you to read or listen to it online as it presented key background information that will apply to the whole series.

The main thrust of this series is this...

God's Call to GracePoint in 2010

In your relationships with God,
with loved ones,
in the family of God,
toward the wounded and wandering...

Reignite the Flame Again in 2010!

It is the very nature of love to lose its passion and zeal. This is true in our love of God, our spouses, loved ones, people in general, and for the spiritually lost. Relationships require constant maintenance to stay fresh, satisfying, and healthy. Some of you have relationships that are broken or strained.

God is calling us to make 2010 the year that we pursue fresh passion, renewed health, and needed reconciliation in our relationships.

One more key point from last week... As you obey God's call this year to reignite the flame and renew health in your relationships, this will require setting goals. The key to achieving personal goals is to first make them simple, realistic, measurable, but also to never give up. Just keep starting all over again.

That's the second motto for this year, "**Starting all over again in 2010.**"

Let us pray...

II. Structure & Purpose of Seven Letters

So we are exploring the seven letters to seven different churches found in chapters 2 and 3 in the Bible book called Revelation. Each of these letters follows a similar pattern, and knowing this pattern aids in our understanding of them. All of the letters contain a description of the glorious and mighty risen Lord Christ Jesus. All but one of the churches received praise from Christ for things they are doing well. All but two of the churches received rebuke from Christ for areas that needed repentance. And each of the letters contains a promise of some eternal reward for those who remain faithful to Christ under trial, suffering, and persecution.

Here's the practical application of these letters to us. In exploring what Christ appreciates about these churches, we discover how to please God. In observing what breaks God's heart, we too can be called to repentance in those areas. And in discovering the inconceivable promises of those who stay faithful to Christ, we can claim perseverance and endurance to be an overcomer in Christ.

Let's explore what Christ wants to say to us through the letter to the church in Smyrna...

III. Scripture

Rev 2:8-11

8 *"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 To those who have ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Those who overcome will not be hurt at all by the second death.

IV. Exploring the Letter to Smyrna

We've pointed out how these letters follow the same pattern, and that most contain a rebuke and some praise from Christ. But one of those pieces is missing from this letter, and its absence is highly important. What's missing? Christ has no words of rebuke for the church in Smyrna. It surely was not a perfect church, no church is. So what was so special about this church that its strengths cancelled out the need for any rebuke from Christ?

We read that Christ knew of their *"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."*

This was a suffering and persecuted congregation. Christ praised them for their faithful endurance in the face of extreme trials and persecution.

Let's explore the source of the persecution and affliction in Smyrna. One resource described the situation in Smyrna like this... *"This city of 200,000 was renowned for its wealth and contribution to the sciences and medicine. It was also a center of emperor worship, having been granted the right in A.D. 23 to build the first temple honoring Tiberius. Each citizen was obligated to burn incense to the "god" Caesar annually and was then issued a certificate of compliance. Christians refused to burn incense and say "Caesar is Lord." As a result, they suffered intensely.¹"*

¹Richards, L. O. (1991; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996). *The Bible readers companion* (electronic ed.) (908). Wheaton: Victor Books.

The Christians in Smyrna were being persecuted from two sources, the Romans, and the Jews. The Jews were persecuting them because they were claiming Christ was the Messiah. The Jews that rejected Christ, Christ was calling the “synagogue of Satan.” The Romans were persecuting them because they refused to declare Caesar Lord, and refused to stop declaring Christ alone is Lord.

Christ commends them for their endurance under such trials, and then warns them that is was going to get even worse. Beginning in verse 10 we read, “*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.*” The persecution grew increasingly more intense until it included martyrdom. We will read the story about one of these martyrs later.

The “crown of life” was the winner’s crown awarded at the annual athletic games, which we now call the “Olympics.” Smyrna was a key participant in the games, so this promise would be especially meaningful to believers living there.²

Christ then gives them one more sustaining promise. “*Those who overcome will not be hurt at all by the second death.*” This “Second Death” is the eternal separation that will be assigned upon all those who reject Christ alone as Savior come final judgment. Christ assured the Believers in Smyrna that if they remained faithful even to the point of the death of martyrdom, they would escape the judgment of eternal death.

We can draw from all this some timeless truth that applies to you and me right now. It is the persecuted church is the pure and powerful church that Christ praises, and finds nothing to rebuke. Christ tells us elsewhere as recorded in the gospels, we are blessed when we are persecuted.

The very aspect of life that most people, especially us spoiled Americans seek to avoid at all costs, suffering and persecution, are the very attributes that Christ calls most blessed!

The very aspect of life that many of see as a disruption to a happy life,
or as a sign of God’s displeasure,
or as a reason to doubt God’s goodness,
namely suffering,
is the very aspect of life that God declares
to be the highest blessing now,
the greatest source of eternal reward later,
and an absolute necessity if we are to grow into Christlikeness.

Suffering is not a referendum against a mighty and loving God; suffering and trial is God’s great gift to humanity!

²Wiersbe, W. W. (1996, c1989). *The Bible exposition commentary*. "An exposition of the New Testament comprising the entire 'BE' series"--Jkt. (Re 2:8). Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books.

Trials and suffering are what complete our sanctification and prepares us for positions of eternal glory! But we will never arrive at that faith-empowering, hope-sustaining truth until we first allow ourselves to wrestle with God over the dark question of suffering.

Let's listen to the story of a young man's struggle with how a loving God allows suffering...

V. The Source of Suffering

a. Video clip: "Questioning God's Existence"

There are a few mandatory requirements we must have in our life if we desire to be mature Christians. One such necessity is to have wrestled well with this ultimate life question of why does a loving and almighty God allow suffering and injustice.

How does your theology account for the suffering and injustice in Haiti right now! Is Pat Roberson correct when he assigned blame to the Haitian people for having made a pact with the devil centuries ago? Personally, I think Pat is whacked in some of his theology, even though he does fantastic things through his ministries.

There aren't endless answers to the question of why God allows suffering.

Either...

- There is no God
- There is a God but either He is not loving enough to care about human suffering, or not powerful enough to do anything about it
- There is an almighty and loving God who both cares and could stop all suffering but He chooses not to

The Bible would affirm this last option. But this leads to the next disturbing question...

- Why does an almighty, all loving God choose to allow thousands of years of horrific injustice and suffering?

That's the question we ask of God. But God then turns the table on us and asks us...

- What would it take to stop all injustice and suffering? What is the source of such injustice and suffering?

The answer as to the source of human suffering is human and angelic free will.

God doesn't cause suffering and injustice, we do!

Even natural disasters are our fault because we caused the Earth to be cursed through our first fall and ongoing sin.

Because suffering and injustice is caused by human and angelic free will, God really only has four choices to stop suffering and injustice...

- Never create beings with free will in the first place. (in which case you and I wouldn't be here having this discussion)
- Override human free will, in which case we would all be like puppets or robots, and none of us really want that
- Send Christ back today, but then all those still unsaved would go to eternal hell
- Use the people of God to overcome as much suffering and injustice now, while we await for the Second Coming, and use all suffering for redemptive purposes.

The Bible would affirm that God has made this last choice.

VI. The Necessity of Suffering

So I declared that a mandatory requirement for Christian maturity is to have wrestled with the question of suffering to arrive at some sustaining, Biblical answers. Let me make what could be a controversial statement... I also declare that another mandatory requirement for deep spiritual growth is to personally experience sorrow and trial. Suffering, sorrow, trial, are not just inevitable they are a necessity to pursue Christlikeness.

Here is why... Our sin, our iniquity, our depravity is so pervasive, so deeply rooted in our souls they only the severe grace of suffering and trial can free us from its grip! In our pursuit this year of having Christ reignite the flame in our hearts, enduring trials will be a necessary component.

Listen to these commands and promises about the necessity of suffering...

1 Peter 2:20-21

But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. 21 To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

Rom 8:16-17

16 The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.

James 1:2-5

2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. 4 Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Rom 5:2-4

And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. 3 Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; 4 perseverance, character; and character, hope.

The Church in Smyrna was one of only two churches that received no rebuke from Christ. Why? What God finds most pleasing in when His children endure the sanctifying power of redemptive suffering! God longs for us to know Him intimately, to be conformed to the image of Christ, so that we are prepared for eternal positions of co-ruling the universe with Christ, and all such blessings require present suffering and trial.

So then, how do we discover this power to endure trials?

VII. The Power to Endure Suffering and Trials

Because suffering is inevitable in our current fallen world, and because trials are a necessary component of becoming like Christ, the Bible has much to say about how to endure trials. Our Bible passage for today gives us four of those promises. We can find endurance and meaning in our trials by clinging to the truth that...

- **Christ Uses Our Trials**

Verse 10 reveals, *“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...”*

As we read about in Job, Christ was going to allow the devil to bring trial, persecuting, and suffering to the Christians in Smyrna, in order to “test” them, in order to refine and strengthen them.

Suffering is always redemptive for the people of God.

- **Christ Rewards our Trials**

We just explored how trials have a present purpose of making us more like Christ. We discover in verses 10 and 11 the promise of eternal reward for our trials... *“Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.” “....Those who overcome will not be hurt at all by the second death.”*

Many see the current suffering around the world and declare God is unjust. Many look at the unjust distribution of wealth in our world, and declare that God is weak. But the real equal distribution will not come through socialism or communism, but through Christ’s return. Listen to these sobering and convicting words of Christ Jesus...

Luke 6:20-26

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. 21 “Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. 22 “Blessed are you when men hate you, and ostracize you, and insult you, and scorn your name as evil, for the sake of the Son of Man. 23 “Be glad in that day and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven. For in the same way their fathers used to treat the prophets. 24 “But woe to you who are rich, for you are receiving your comfort in full. 25 “Woe to you who are well-fed now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.”

Those who suffer most now will be rewarded most in God's eternal kingdom.

This is the "Great Reversal" of the Kingdom of God!

- **Christ Limits Our Trials**

Verse 10 continues... "*and you will suffer persecution for ten days....*" The word here translated "persecution" is a very strong word that denotes "crushing pressure." The number "10" in the book of Revelation represents completeness.

Christ is telling them, and us, "*there are times in your journey when you will need to endure crushing pressure on your faith, but take courage, I am in control, and it will only last for as long as it takes to complete its designed purposes.*"

For God's people, even the extent of our trials is under God's sovereign and loving control.

- **Christ is with Us in Our Trials**

The most comforting and sustaining promise we have as Christians is discovered in verse 9... "*I know your afflictions and your poverty....*"

This word "your" here is a "singular "your." Christ could have just as easily put in a plural "your" meaning that he was aware of the community suffering of the whole congregation. Instead, Christ inspired the use of the personal, singular "your," emphasizing that Christ was intimately aware of the personal trials that each believer was experiencing.

This is the most sustaining,
most important,
most life-giving,
most life-changing answer to suffering and injustice...
that we serve a God who became human
to know what it is like to suffer in the flesh,
to overcome suffering on the cross,
and to send the Holy Spirit to redeem trials
and to be with us as we go through trials.

The people of God are never alone in their suffering and trials.

VIII. The Rewards of Suffering

Christ warned the Christians in Smyrna that times of increased persecution were soon coming that would include martyrdom. We have an account in church history of one such martyrdom of Polycarp. His story inspires our faith to endure even to the point of death.

(Taken from <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0102.htm>)

Polycarp was a direct pupil of the apostle John, and served as the bishop of the church at Smyrna. His martyrdom stands as one of the most well documented events of antiquity.

As Polycarp was entering into the stadium, there came to him a voice from heaven, saying, "Be strong, and show yourself a man, O Polycarp!" No one saw who it was that spoke to him; but those of our brethren who were present heard the voice.

The proconsul sought to persuade him to deny Christ, saying, "Have respect to your old age,Swear by the fortune of Caesar; repent, and say, "Away with the Atheists)meaning those that didn't believe Caesar was divine)." But Polycarp, gazing with a stern countenance on all the multitude of the wicked heathen then in the stadium, and waving his hand towards them, while with groans he looked up to heaven, said, "Away with the Atheists."

Then, the proconsul urging him, and saying, Swear, and I will set you at liberty, reproach Christ. Polycarp declared, "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?"

The proconsul then said to him, I have wild beasts at hand; to these will I cast you, unless you repent. But he answered, Call them then, for we are not accustomed to repent of what is good in order to adopt that which is evil; and it is well for me to be changed from what is evil to what is righteous.

But again the proconsul said to him, "I will cause you to be consumed by fire, seeing you despise the wild beasts, if you will not repent." But Polycarp said, "You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour, and after a little is extinguished, but are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. But why do you tarry? Bring forth what you will."

Polycarp is sentenced to be burned, the funeral pile is erected, and Polycarp prays...

When he had pronounced his amen, and so finished his prayer, those who were appointed for the purpose kindled the fire. And as the flame blazed forth in great fury, we, to whom it was given to witness it, beheld a great miracle, and have been preserved that we might report to others what then took place.

For the fire, shaping itself into the form of an arch, like the sail of a ship when filled with the wind, encompassed as by a circle the body of the martyr. And he appeared within not like flesh which is burnt, but as bread that is baked, or as gold and silver glowing in a furnace. Moreover, we perceived such a sweet odor coming from the pile, as if frankincense or some such precious spices had been smoking there.

At length, when those wicked men perceived that his body could not be consumed by the fire, they commanded an executioner to go near and pierce him through with a dagger. And on his doing this, there came forth a dove, and a great quantity of blood, so that the fire was extinguished.

May our Lord give to each us the faith of a martyr! I invite us to stand now, and let us strengthen our faith by declaring what we believe....

The Heidelberg Catechism
Questions 26, 27, & 28

Q. What do you believe when you say, "I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth"?

A. That the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who out of nothing created heaven and earth and everything in them, who still upholds and rules them by his eternal counsel and providence, is my God and Father because of Christ his Son.

I trust Him so much that I do not doubt He will provide whatever I need for body and soul, and He will turn to my good whatever adversity he sends me in this sad world.

He is able to do this because he is almighty God; He desires to do this because He is a faithful Father.

Q. What do you understand by the providence of God?

A. Providence is the almighty and ever present power of God by which He upholds, as with His hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty—all things, in fact, come to us not by chance but from His Fatherly hand.

Q. How does the knowledge of God's creation and providence help us?

A. We can be patient when things go against us, thankful when things go well, and for the future we can have good confidence in our faithful God and Father that nothing will separate us from His love. All creatures are so completely in His hand that without His will they can neither move nor be moved.