

Refuge Bible Fellowship
1600 Chicago Avenue, Suite R7
Riverside, CA 92507
refugefellowship.org

Series: For the Time is Near
Raul Montano, Sr. Pastor
October 11, 2015

God's Glory Comes Through Perseverance
Revelation 2:8-11

The title of this morning's message is: *God's Glory Comes Through Perseverance*. Last week we went over the letter that Jesus had written to the church that was in Ephesus. Today we're going to travel 35 miles north, up the coast to a small town, which we'll learn is actually not so small, to a beautiful city called Smyrna. So let's start out by reading what it is that Jesus had written to the church in Smyrna.

Beginning in Revelation 2:8: ***“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.***

⁹ “‘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. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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.’

[Prayer] *Father, You have ordained our lives in such a way that Your sovereignty is on display. You know each and every thought. You know each and every action that we take in our lives, yet You have something wonderful planned for us. You even know when we're going to go through suffering and yet You don't remove it from our lives, but You are there to help us through those times to Your glory. I pray this morning that You would not only comfort our hearts, but that You would strengthen us in our faith, that we would truly have no fear of what man can do to us but that we would fear You more and have more reverence for You than anyone else. I pray that we would say, "Lord" to no one else but You, that we would endure and persevere, and in the end we would see You in all of Your glory. We thank You for this time that You've given to us. We want to make sure that we are totally surrendered and submitted to Your will. With that said and at this moment, we do surrender, we do ask that Your Spirit would move mightily in our hearts, that we would be transformed continually into the image of Your Son Jesus Christ, that You would be honored and in the end we would finish strong and receive that crown of life. You've promised that to all those who persevere. And so Father, we commit this time into Your hands, we thank You, and we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Like I said last time, this is kind of a series within a series. We've titled the series for the book of Revelation *For the Time is Near*, but these messages on the seven churches that the Lord wrote letters to is *How to be a Conquering Church* because we need to learn, we need to understand what it is to be a conquering church. We

God's Glory Comes Through Perseverance

want that power. We want to walk by the Spirit, not by the flesh. We want to make sure that we are pure and truly holy as a church. Now, we're going into a section of scripture where God knows that this church is about to be persecuted like we don't know here, but others do throughout the world.

Each month 322 Christians are killed for their faith; 214 churches and Christian properties are destroyed; 722 forms of violence are committed against Christians every month, according to Open Doors.

The Voice of the Martyrs says this about a couple of pastors in China: *“Two pastors have been found guilty of “utilizing a cult to undermine law enforcement” and sent to prison. The pastors, Zhao Weiliang and Cheng Hongpeng, along with 20 other Christians were singing hymns in a rural factory, when the building was raided by police on June 25, 2014. Pastors Zhao and Cheng were sentenced in May 2015 [so just a few months ago] to four years imprisonment and three years imprisonment, respectively.*

More than 50 police and plain-clothes officers burst into the rural wood mill factory owned by a church member without identifying themselves and took the 22 Christians into custody. Among those taken to the local police station were a pregnant woman and several small children, including two babies less than a year old. The officers also confiscated musical instruments and equipment.”

During this time the people were deprived of food and water to the point to where the people started saying, "Hey, if you don't at least give our children some food and water, they're going to die, as well as the babies." They're captors were interrogating them, making every attempt to drive them to a confession that they were a part of a cult that was undermining the implementation of the state's laws.

The article goes on to say: *“In a legal appeal, Pastor Zhao’s lawyer stated that the believers were not part of any specific organization that would undermine the state laws. The group had conducted choir practice at the factory which had no close neighbors. They did not bother anyone nor break any laws. He added, “If singing hymns were a crime, then perhaps the Cao County [authorities] would have to kill all the skylarks.”*

The lawyer argued that though China has freedom of religion, the arrests are “a case of persecution of Christians.”

Freedom of religion for China means something entirely different today than it does in the U.S.. Persecution, by the way, is nothing new to the ear of Christians. I remember when I first came to faith, I heard right away about the persecutions of Christians throughout the world. I have to tell you that up to that point I was oblivious to it. I just knew that there were all kinds of problems throughout the world, but I never really was interested in any specific group.

Persecution is nothing new to the eyes and ears of God. In fact, God not only knows about it but He's also with us as we go through tribulation. He gives us some words of encouragement, not to get out of it, but to endure it. Not only is He with us, not only does He encourage us, not only does He strengthen us through those tough times, but He also promises eternal life with Him in the end. Noting that the second death will have no effect, as we read, on us as Christians who endure persecution.

I want to take a moment to understand the church that Jesus Christ is writing to and addressing in this letter because I believe that we will see that they, and their world, aren't much different than our world today.

In fact, Smyrna is still in existence today. It is known as Izmir and it located in Turkey. It's a populace city boasting over 4 million people. So it's not your small, average town. It's a very large city. It's located on the

God's Glory Comes Through Perseverance

coast of the Aegean Sea and contains a beautiful bay. It could, at the time that we're looking at here and even now, be completely enclosed and be safe from any enemy that's coming from the sea.

It's a modern city and one of the main hubs for exporting various agricultural and industrial products from its port. Smyrna was a city of wealth and of commercial greatness. It was a city that stood apart in its beauty. In fact, it claimed to be the "Glory of Asia", where architecture and city planning were second to none.

Smyrna possessed a famous stadium and thus, by the language that we have here in this section of scripture, they were familiar with the crown because they had hosted Olympic games at that time. They possessed an equally famous library. It claimed to have the largest public theater in Asia. It claimed to be the birthplace of Homer and possessed a monument in his honor.

Smyrna had this famous street called the "Golden Street". Located at the end of that street was the Temple of Cybele and if you drove it you would see temples of Apollo, Asklepios, Aphrodite, and inland toward the foothills, stood the Temple of Zeus.

It was a grand city! Beautiful! Amazing! You would come into it and it was powerful! It was influential! It was a commercial hub. Smyrna was very much aware of its greatness. They boasted of it and were very proud.

In contrast to that beauty, we have the church. We have the Christians. In contrast to that beauty and wonder of the city, were the humble meeting of the Christians who lived there. Smyrna would look with contempt on the poor and humble Christians of the time. They would despise them as having no importance whatsoever. "You are of no significance to us." They were so despised that they were basically given no equal opportunities like everyone else had, even at the local synagogue of the Jews. We'll learn more about that in a moment.

Jesus is the First and Last, but to the majority of Smyrna earthly honors were the first and the last. Smyrna had something else that made life difficult for Christians who were there at that time and that is Caesar worship. Caesar worship came about through the Pax Romana, or the Roman Peace, that was enjoyed by all the provinces that were under Roman rule at the time.

It was the spirit of Rome because it was peaceful at the time. It was the spirit of Rome that was being hailed and turned into a power that men were willing to worship, and thus was born the worship of Dea Roma, or the goddess of Rome. I just want to give you a good understanding of what they were facing at the time. Like I said, I don't believe that it's much different than the time that we're living in today. Just substitute some of these gods, and these buildings and structures to so many different things that we were worship, and sacrifice our time and kids over.

Listen to this, at the beginning, this Caesar worship was spontaneous, it was voluntary, but it went further because there was one person who incarnated the very spirit they were worshiping. It was the Emperor Caesar. He was the one who the people started to worship. The problem is when someone starts to be worshiped and is put up on a pedestal, that they start to believe it. Then they start receiving it. That's the danger. At some point, Caesar worship was no longer voluntary, but became compulsory. It was something that was necessary and required. Once a year each person was to burn a pinch of incense on the altar to the godhead of Caesar. This act was to be done in the presence of Roman officials and with it came a certificate of completion of your religious duties for that year.

This is precisely what the Christians in Smyrna refused to do; to burn incense on a false altar and confess that "Caesar is Lord". Because of this, they were regarded as dangerous and disloyal. Because you didn't follow;

God's Glory Comes Through Perseverance

because you didn't compromise; because you did not keep the peace, you were regarded as dangerous and disloyal. They were in constant threat of execution because of it.

On the other hand, there was this large population of Jews in the area. They had synagogues and were very influential, and powerful. They were accepted by the Roman rule, by Caesar himself. What they were known to do is inform against the Christians to gain the ear of the local governor. In fact, they themselves would incite attacks of persecution upon the Christians. It was a very difficult time and Jesus is telling them, "I know about all of this! I know what's going to happen!"

In Smyrna the Jews were responsible for one of the famous martyrdoms in history. It was the martyrdom of Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna. You can read about this in more detail. But he was held and given the choice to worship the godhead of Caesar or die. This was out of the blue. They were gathering together and just spontaneously they came and raided the gathering. They pulled Polycarp off to the side and said, "Listen, either you confess Caesar as Lord, or die."

This was his response: *"Eighty and six years have I served Christ, and He has never done me wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"*

And while Polycarp was at the stake, he said, *"It is well. I fear not the fire that burns for a season and after a while is quenched. Why do you delay? Come, do your will."*

And as the flames grew taller, he prayed this prayer: *"I thank thee that thou has graciously thought me worthy of this day and of this hour, that I may receive a portion in the number of the martyrs, in the cup of thy Christ."*

Those were his words. Again, it didn't catch God by surprise. He knew that it was coming. By the way, we need to note this, Polycarp was prepared. He was prepared. Even if he was called out in some classroom and was asked to stand up, and asked if he was a Christian or not, he would say, "Absolutely! I am a Christian. I am a follower of the one true living God! You may kill the flesh, but I will live for eternity with God in all of His glory." He was prepared to die by the evidence of the last moments of his life. God knew this!

Jesus knew this would come and He sent word to the church in Smyrna that He knew their situation, and their troubles, and their suffering that would soon come to them, but He was calling them to do one thing! Not to avoid, not to scatter. He wasn't even telling them to go underground. He was telling them to persevere and stand up! Jesus was telling them, as He tells us, "I'm aware of your tribulation. I am aware of your poverty. I understand the slander that is coming, or would come to you at some point from those that they say they are Jews and are not." This is Scripture, the word of God and He refers to them as this ***"but are a synagogue of Satan."***

Who are Christians? Who are truly those who are part of God's family? Those who confess that Jesus is Lord! Period. Right now we are looking at the epicenter of the world. Absolutely, we're looking at Israel. But know, in the end, no one has salvation except through Jesus Christ. There is no exception.

Notice, notice, notice that Jesus was not telling them to compromise for the sake of keeping the peace! Sometimes we get so wrapped up in, "Oh, we just need to keep the peace. That's what the Word says, 'As much as depends on you live at peace with all men.'" But we don't understand, if we take the whole Bible in it's context, it doesn't mean to compromise. Because when we're faced with the decision between obeying man and obeying God, if it contradicts, we are forced as followers of Jesus Christ to decide where we stand. Do we truly stand with the Lord? Or, with anything else, and everyone else?

God's Glory Comes Through Perseverance

We are called to persevere. He wasn't telling them to "go along with the law of the land to avoid any trouble. Avoid arrest and persecution at all costs. If they ask for Christians, don't say a word! If you're kind of standing out, take a step back. You're being too radical." He wasn't saying that. We're called to be a people that are set apart. In fact, we're called a peculiar people. Are we peculiar enough to be considered peculiar by others around us. Maybe some more than others. He was saying, "Stay the course. Finish the race. Seek the prize." That's what He was saying.

Do Not Fear Suffering in Christ

I want to just give you a couple of things that we really need to understand from our text here. I just want to preface it with this: To every church, Jesus identified Himself differently to them. To this church specifically, He said in 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.'"*** This comes from the Lord, and He said, "I want you to describe Me to them, this jewel that I have in Asia, in this city called Smyrna. I want you to encourage them with *this* description of Me." The words, the very breath of God! When He says, "the first and the last" that means that He has everything actively in His power, in His authority. He's reminding them, "Although you're going to go through all these things, I care about every little detail and in the end, I am the Last for you and you will see Me." He says to remind them of this: "I'm the One who died. I'm the One who also conquered death and the grave, and came to life. I want you to remind this church in Smyrna that that is who is writing to them. I understand! I know completely and perfectly what they're going to go through."

By the way, this is the church that did not have any accusation. The other churches had accusations. We learned about Ephesus and how they lost their first love and they needed to deal with that. But this church had no accusation by the Lord.

They were in the midst of this metropolis. They were in the midst of humanity. They were in the midst of human worship, of false god worship, of gatherings that were truly cultish. They were in the midst of persecution where they were forced to worship something other than God, or die.

He said, "Do not fear suffering in Christ." That's the first thing He tells them in verse 10: ***"Do not fear what you are about to suffer."*** [repeats] Jesus encouraged the Christians in Smyrna to not fear. Don't fear!! By the way, fear is a natural reaction to preserve oneself; emotionally, socially, physically, relationally, and in other ways that we learn about once we come to the place where we are fearing. Fear can pervert and distort reality and destroy trust. That's what fear does.

The next time you fear something, ask yourself those questions...Is this a perversion of reality? Is this a distortion of reality? I know it seems to be real, I understand these phobias. I understand that a little spider over there can seem like it's a tarantula. You think, "I know I shouldn't fear that thing! I know it's not going to chase me...where is it?!" We know these things, but it's a distortion of reality.

Jesus knew that there were some who were going to suffer in a short time. By the way, in the language of the time, "ten days" meant shortly. Not specifically ten days, but "very shortly you're going to endure some suffering that I want you to know that you can persevere through."

He encouraged them not to fear. Why is that? We're reminded "don't fear." What happens when we lack fear? When we don't allow it to dictate what we do? We call someone like that courageous. We'll actually run towards danger. We're prepared for it. We're willing to go into a burning building to save people. We're willing to scoot under a car that's leaning to pull someone out of it. We're willing to charge toward someone who is

God's Glory Comes Through Perseverance

shooting at us because we know that's the enemy and there are people that need to be taken care of. When we lack fear we are free to do those things that are necessary, and that includes in the faith. Why? Because when you lack fear you are free and clear and strong to remain steadfast and focused on walking out your faith unto God. That's how Polycarp could unflinchingly confess his faith unto Jesus Christ. Having no fear of external temporary persecution. His eyes were focused on the prize of the upward call and knew that he would soon be in glory. That's why.

Second, He was telling them to remain faithful even unto death. Jesus sees physical death not as the end but as the finish line, or the door to come into His presence. How you run the race of life has eternal significance because it will determine whether you win with God, or remain against Him and thus will be eternally separated. It matters! It matters what we do in this life! The crown of life signifies the award of someone who has won at the annual athletic games that Smyrna was familiar with at the time. And knowing history we also know what He is referring to.

James 1:12 says, **"Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him."** They were being encouraged by Jesus to be a conquering church that had no fear and were instead, full of faith.

Hebrews 12:1-2 is very encouraging, telling us, **"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."** We are truly victors in Christ; truly conquerors.

Second Death

Then there's the second death which is referred to by the Lord. There's a couple sections of Scripture here in chapters 20 and 21 that refer to the second death.

Revelation 20:14-15: **"Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵ And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."** Does it matter what we do in this life? Yes, absolutely! Does it matter who we worship, who we surrender to this side of heaven? Yes, it does because of that second verse I read there. You see, hell was not made for people. It was made for Satan and the fallen angels. We are there by choice when we neglect to surrender to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. That is where reconciliation comes in. That is where restoration comes in. That is how we know eternity with God once more.

Revelation 21:7-8: **"The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. ⁸ But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death."** But the Lord is saying here, "Listen, if you persevere, if you don't compromise, if you stand with Me, you will be conquerors and not be hurt by the second death."

It was this letter that was written to this small, insignificant group of people who called themselves "followers of Jesus Christ". They were this lampstand and in the midst of all these lampstands, stood Jesus. This lampstand did not reflect or glorify anything in and of themselves, but they glorified the Lord.

God's Glory Comes Through Perseverance

God understood that it costs to be dedicated to the Lord. It costs to be a dedicated Christian, and we know that it's true in some places more than others. We read about what happened in China last year where these two pastors were sentenced to prison time for gathering in some little factory and singing hymns!

But it costs you eternally to not be a Christian because you will be eternally bankrupt and lost and separated from the glory of God. I'm not being narrow-minded, I'm being truthful because I believe what I read. I believe what is told to me by the very Word of God. Jesus said, "***I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.***" [John 14:6] So, if that's a fact, if I believe that, then I will tell you over and over and over...without Him you will experience hell, separation from God for eternity! But with Christ, you are a victor, you are a conqueror of sin and of death, and one day you will be in all of His glory for eternity.

Now, God's people need to be ready. We need to know that there will be some, there will be many, who will not be considered wealthy in human terms. They may even be persecuted. But God's eternal riches await them in heaven where they will enjoy God's presence forever. In fact, as the Lord wrote to this church in verse 9: "***I know your tribulation and your poverty*** [but He had to add in there as just a reminder] ***(but you are rich)***"

You can't even begin to imagine what awaits you! You are rich beyond anyone's imagination here on earth. "I know, you don't have anything and are being denied all the comforts. I understand I didn't give you a big building with a nice golden inlay of intricacies and architecture. I know I didn't give you any of that! I know that you're despised and just kicked to the side. I understand that, but you are rich!" Did you know that you are rich in Christ?

The question is: Are you God's people? Do you know Jesus as Savior and Lord? Is there evidence of that in your life? Because I have to tell you, do not be deceived. God is not mocked! You can pull the wool over people's eyes around you, but I have to warn you, when you come into a relationship with Jesus Christ the Word is very clear that there will be fruit. You will love the gathering of His people. You will love to spend time with Him. That is the fruit that comes from a relationship; a true, sincere, and genuine relationship with Jesus Christ. Let me tell you that the alternative to that is what I just read in Revelation 20 and 21, and I don't want anyone to not know the two because at the end I'm responsible to tell you, and then you're responsible for making the choice. I pray that you make the right choice and surrender your lives to Jesus Christ. I pray that you know without a shadow of a doubt that you will be in all of His glory, that He is truly Savior and He is Lord in your life.

If you have any questions. If you would like to recommit your life. If you would just like to be prayed over come up. We'd love to pray with you. The elders and pastors are always up front. We'd love to answer any questions that you have.

I'll end with what Paul says in Philippians 3:-12-16: "***Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. ¹⁶ Only let us hold true to what we have attained.***"

[Prayer] *Father, we come to You and I pray Lord that You would strengthen us. I pray that You would forgive us of the things that we tend to look at as difficulties in life. Many of the things that we're learning of here through Your Word were true sufferings, were true seasons of difficulty. I pray that we would put things in proper perspective and that we would look to You, the Author and Perfecter of our faith, and that we would follow*

God's Glory Comes Through Perseverance

exactly what You did, even unto death, that we would be called "those who persevere in the faith", that we too would one day know and wear into eternity, the crown of life. For we will be victors with You of sin and death. We look forward to that day when we see You in all of Your glory. I just pray that you would strengthen Your church and help us to walk with You more closely. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.