

Smyrna

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Preacher: Neil MacMillan

[0 : 0 0] So we're in Revelation tonight and chapter 2, so the second of the letters that we find in Revelation chapter 2 and 3 which are written to seven different churches and I'm just going to read it again, it's a very short little letter. So to the angel of the church in Smyrna, right, 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 a slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not but are of the synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you're about to suffer. Behold the devil is about to throw some of you into prison that you may be tested and for 10 days you will of 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. So Tom and I were both in Lisbon this week, we were at a conference for European church planters and on Tuesday morning I was speaking to these planters who are from about 22 different European countries I think and about 250 of them there. So I thought I would start off with a sort of humble joke about being Scottish. So I told them a joke that was once told to me by a Hungarian. So in 1989 I met a Hungarian who had lived all his life behind the iron curtain.

This was the year the Berlin Wall came down. So I said what do you know about Scotland having lived all your life in the Soviet bloc and he said well let me tell you a joke. So he said there are three men in a pub, one is Hungarian, one is English and one is Scottish and they've all got a pint of beer and a fly comes along and it lands in the Hungarian's pint of beer. So he looks at it and disgusts, takes it back to the bar and gets himself another drink and then a fly comes along and it lands in the pint of beer for the Englishman and he sort of looks and disdains, picks out the fly, throws it away and drinks his pint and then a fly comes along and lands in the Scotsman's pint of beer so he picks up the fly, rings out the beer, throws the fly away and then drinks his pint. And so I said Scottish people are very mean but God still loves us so if he loves us he can love all Europeans. Well anyway for the rest of the day I had people coming up to me going

I did not understand your joke and even the other English speakers from across the pond, there was a few Americans they were saying to me what do you mean by mean? Because they think somebody whose mean is kind of angry and nasty, what I was meaning stingy and grippy as in Abaddonian meanness. And so I started to think you know by what means do we determine the meaning of mean and there are four different meanings of the word mean once we start to think about it. So the point of that is to say words are really confusing sometimes we lose the definition of words we start to think about the real meaning behind the language we use and in the Christian life actually the language we use is very important and one of the words that we don't often think about enough is just this idea this word church okay so especially if you've grown up in the church we assume a lot of things about it without really thinking it through people outside the church don't often really know what the church is about and that's because people inside the church often have forgotten what church is really about. Church for some of us is Sunday it's a meeting church for some of us is St. Columbus it's a building but of course when we start to think through what the New Testament teaches to us about the church it immediately becomes clear church it's not about meetings or events or buildings it's a community of people but it's a very distinct community of people it's a community of people who are inhabited by the risen and reigning Savior Jesus Christ and then that's really important for the book of Revelation because the church is going through a crisis and so John as he writes to the churches he wants to really instill with them or within them a great sense of what it is to be the church to know that they are a community loved by Christ created by Christ kept by Christ and empowered by Jesus Christ the church in other words is extraordinary and it's an amazing privilege for you and I to belong to the church of Jesus Christ to be counted among his people if we're believers but along with being or with enjoying that privilege often there's

a cost associated and at that cost the heat of being a Christian the heat of belonging to the church was really coming down hard at the end of the first century when the book of Revelation was written so this is written post 90 AD maybe around 95 AD and there is a severe persecution against the church and it's into that situation that the Apostle John is speaking to bring strength and hope it's a time of struggle for the church a time when the church is beginning to compromise morally a church when the first generation of believers is dying out and some of the passion for Jesus has been lost and a church now that is facing strong persecution so how does the book of Revelation begin what's chapter one about well chapter one in the book of Revelation is a vision of the majesty and the glory of Jesus Christ let me just share a little bit with you I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me this is chapter one on turning I saw seven golden lampstands in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man clothed with a robe and with a golden sash around his chest the hairs of his head were white like white wool like snow his eyes were like a flame of fire and his feet were like burnished bronze refined in a furnace his voice was like the roar of many waters in his right hand he held seven stars from his mouth came a sharp toothed sword his face was like the sun shining in full strength when I saw my fella his feet is though dead so what's John doing John is giving us and giving them a vision of Jesus that is so great that they will understand that Jesus is a savior worth living for and worth dying for that it's worth being willing to sacrifice greatly to belong to Jesus and to belong to his church and that's a message that's real and pertinent for Christians today in some parts of the world it will cost you your life occasionally to follow Jesus Christ but for all of us there is

a cost to taking up the cross and following Jesus for every Christian there is suffering and when suffering comes to the Christian that's often difficult and confusing for us no matter how dark life gets them John wants to say you have a great savior one that you can worship and love trust and obey in all the situations of life one of these one of the recipients in Smyrna of this letter was a young man called Pauli Karp so probably about the same age as many of the young men here today 60 years later Pauli Karp was the bishop of the church in Smyrna and was martyred for his faith and so even here 60 years before Pauli Karp has been ministered to as God prepares them for the cost of discipleship and so as we look ahead into life we can be sure that it will cost us to follow Jesus in different ways how are we going to live for Christ in this world and we will live for Christ if we are gripped by a passionate love for him and a view of his glory that he is a savior worth living for and worth dying for so let's look at the letter it begins to enter the church in Smyrna right the words of the first and the last who died and came to life now that's an echo from chapter one so in chapter one when John falls at his feet as though dead

[10 : 51] Jesus lays his right hand on John and says fear not I am the first and the last the living one I died and behold I am forevermore and so now to the letter in the church in Smyrna again Jesus says the first and the last the one who is dead but now is alive by reminding them of this Jesus is saying to them don't be afraid I am the first and the last that's what he said to John fear not I am the first and the last and so as he speaks to the Christians in Smyrna he's saying the same thing whatever your circumstances in life don't be afraid don't be afraid I'm the living one I was dead but behold I am alive forever and ever Jesus is the source of life and strength for every Christian as the risen Savior he's reminding us that he's in control absolute and total control he's defeated death and all his enemies now suffering is difficult for us at many levels but one of the hard things about suffering of course is that it can be very difficult to deal with because we're not in control of our situation stuff happens to us and sometimes terrible things happen to us things that we really struggle with and we find them really hard to come to term with terms with because we're not in control there's nothing we can do about them there's nothing that we can stop do to stop them I remember scooting through around about in

Kirkody once hitting a patch of diesel and my car just went right around the roundabout on its own without me having any control whatsoever very scary moment and life can feel a scary place to be for some people at some point and your life probably feels like a scary place for you occasionally but he's in control we may often feel fragile but Christ is risen and he reigned over all situations and that means that we're safe as long as Christ reigns Christ's people are safe so he's in control the second thing is he says I know your tribulations I know your afflictions I know what's going on so one of the other difficult things about suffering sometimes it's just this fact that we feel really alone we feel misunderstood nobody quite knows what we're going through we don't feel really able to speak about the heart that we're experiencing we don't verbalize it we don't want to be a burden to

others or we just don't feel that we have anyone to turn to jazz singer Louis Armstrong once sang nobody knows the trouble I've seen nobody knows but Jesus so in that little gospel song there's a profound truth there are things that probably nobody knows but

Jesus knows I know your afflictions and the amazing thing about Jesus of course is that he knows affliction from the inside out because he tells us in all your afflictions I am afflicted what is their suffering like well he says I know your poverty now Smyrna was a really wealthy city it was an economic powerhouse it's Manhattan or the city of London or Macau or Hong Kong is a place where people went to make a lot of money but in the midst of all that prosperity the Christians were suffering because they were being discriminated against economically so people didn't want to do business with them anymore didn't want to trade with them they were really hurting financially so there was a real financial cost to being a Christian and living with Christian ethics and Christian integrity but what does Jesus say he says okay financially you've you've suffered you've taken a massive hit but you are rich rich in what sense and rich in the terms that they have Christ as their saviour that they have the hope of eternity they're rich spiritually they're rich because they have God as I was saying what Augustine had which was this he who is Christ plus everything has no more than he who is Christ alone and so in that sense they are still rich

Jesus tells us that he though he was rich became poor so that through his poverty we might be made rich rich in hope rich in love rich in joy rich in peace we have great riches in Jesus Christ and there have been slandered aren't they there's the poverty and the economic discrimination there's the slander of those who speak against them vicious cruel worlds there's prison do not fear what you're about to suffer he says in verse 10 behold the devil is about to throw some of you into prison that you may be tested and for 10 days you will have tribulations be faithful unto death Pauli carp was faithful to death he was burned at the stake so what is going on when Christians suffer like this well the devil we're told here is going to test them push them try their faith see if it's genuine see if Christ really is everything to them or if their lives are driven by different passions the devil is going to test them even to the point of death and they're being told this in advance you see God knows what's going to happen to them God knows how deeply they're going to suffer but God doesn't prevent it from happening God permits all this but what he says is that he will permit no more than they can bear so there's this kind of slightly obscure reference for us you're going to be tested and then for 10 days you will have tribulation so as far as I can work out the 10 days is just saying it's a set period of time this will happen for a while but it won't go on forever I'm going to allow it to happen but I won't let it be more than you can take and the great thing about God is this that he promises he will not let us be tried beyond what we can bear and he will give us grace for every sorrow I remember my own dad saying to me he died a long time ago but he in the months before he died he said to me I've always been afraid of death but I'm not anymore God gives us grace when we need it for the things that we need it for and so whatever you're going to suffer in life if you're a Christian you can believe and know

God will not leave you short in the circumstances that you're afraid of the things you fear the most God will make them a piece to you he will make them a place of grace for you he will make them a place where he is present for you so there are great theological truths here in the letter to the church and Smyrna that we need to hold on to in order to maintain perspective when things are tough there are things we need to hold on to truth that will allow us to remain true to our gospel calling and to bear witness to Christ even when it's tough God is always in control that's one thing we know we are always rich that's another thing we know we have always things to be thankful for we will never be asked to carry what we cannot bear and God's grace will always be sufficient so they're told be faithful even to the point of death why well what we have in Smyrna are two ideas of death isn't it be faithful unto death we're told in verse 10 and then in verse 11 the one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death so we're told here there are two kinds of death there's physical death and there's spiritual and eternal death physical death will separate us from this world and comes to everyone of us eternal death separates us from God and will not come to everyone if we're united to Christ by faith then there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God and Christ Jesus we can face even death without fear we can face anything without fear because the one who is most important to us can never be taken from us we will always have Jesus so that's the kind of way that God lays us out in front of us then is to say do you have that hope will there be a time when you will be separated eternally from God are you ready that's what he's asking these Christians are they going to stay true are they ready it's really interesting one in the seven letters this is the only letter without condemnation or criticism all we find in this letter are words of

encouragement because God is saying to them be faithful to me in these hard situations and if you're faithful I will give you the crown of life you're going to be the [22:18] Barcelona or the Real Madrid of the spiritual universe you're gonna be champions you're gonna have a gold medal you're gonna celebrate a great victory one day when you stand with Jesus in heaven so Jesus is this calling take up your cross and follow me Dr. Bonhoeffer a German pastor during the second world war was also martyred for his faithfulness to Jesus and he said when Christ calls a man he bids him come and die so we've been asked and called by God to be faithful to stick with Jesus even when things are hard and life even when we're hurting when we're sad when we're lonely when we feel broken to be faithful to Jesus you may be in the midst of a really hard time in your own life struggling suffering doubting fearful you may be in a dark tunnel where you feel there's no light at the end of the tunnel well remember this Jesus does not condemn you for your struggles your doubts your crisis or your suffering he just comes alongside you and says don't waver don't give in stay true love me find your joy in me keep true to me and often when we see these things we say I can't do it it feels too much I feel broken life is too hard and in those situations Jesus says I know you can't do it because I know your afflictions I know how hard it is but I've done it for you Jesus was true to God in the dark times Jesus was persecuted but was faithful Jesus was arrested and tortured but was a Beijing even to death and then Jesus rose to eternal life and he did all of this for us and so he says to us I've done all this for you and now you can do it through me we have an amazing savior he doesn't stand outside our sufferings and tells to quit moaning and just get on with things he stands inside our suffering he stands with us in the darkness and the despair in the difficult times and he says I know what it's like and he went to the darkness he suffered for us to bear our sorrows he became poor so that through his poverty we might be rich so what grace there is in Jesus Christ for us and what kindness what great and loving savior we have so whatever your pain is this evening or your anxiety or your grief in Jesus says bring it to me Jesus invites you to himself as the one in whom you'll find your peace and Jesus will give you grace to endure and so for myself for you there's a wonderful invitation and there's

a wonderful comfort in the letter to the church at Smyrna Jesus knows everything we're going through Jesus understands it Jesus allows us to be faithful and enables us to be faithful in the midst of it and Jesus promises it's not always going to be like that and one day you're going to stand with him in all glory and in all joy with no more tears and that's a hope he gives to the church here and it's the same hope that we share today so I'm going to conclude pray we'll sing our last song father we want to thank you for your word tis tonight we pray that the comfort you gave to your church in Smyrna will be the same comfort that we receive here tonight Lord our circumstances are varied and hard but often life just throws so much at us and it bewilders us but Lord maybe we sent our lives and Christ this evening maybe we may we be reassured of your heart of love towards us that you empathize with us you understand us and you care for us more deeply than we can ever imagine and so may we turn to you this evening and find that Jesus is our rest and our peace help us to take our burdens and our fears to you tonight Lord God in Jesus name Amen