

3 October, 1999
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church
Mark James Toone

YOU'VE GOT MAIL
OVERCOMING ADVERSITY
Revelation 2: 8-11

I was wearing a different hat this week. Ordinarily when I am in a hospital, it is as a pastor coming to visit one of my parishioners. This week, I was a family member waiting as my mom underwent fairly major surgery. I went in with mom and dad and, while we were waiting, I thought I would read some scripture. I've done this hundreds of times before. This time, I had my new Eugene Petersen rendering of the Psalms. "Mom, why don't I read the last five psalms to you? They are the Hallelujah psalms. Everyone begins and ends with "hallelujah." It seemed like a great way of keeping her mind off of the impending surgery so, as she lay there waiting for the orderly to wheel her into the operating room, I began to read Psalm 146:

"Hallelujah! Oh my soul, praise God! All my life long I'll praise God, singing songs to my God as long as I live. Don't put your life in the hands of experts who know nothing of life...mere humans don't have what it takes." Yikes! This is comforting? Fortunately, we had a great laugh about it. But I'm going to steer clear of Psalm 146 in the future.

We all knew that mom was going to be in for a period of suffering as she recovered from her surgery. But we were also confident that, in the end, she would be fine. And when the doctor came in a few hours later and told us it went well, we were REALLY confident that everything would be fine.

Listen to John's letter to the Church of Smyrna. They have some suffering ahead. In fact, they've already been suffering. What is the image that John leaves with us from his letter to Smyrna? (Read)

Last week we looked at the letter to the Ephesians. Now, if we get into our cars and head 35 miles north, we will come to the harbor city of Smyrna. Smyrna is the only one of the seven ancient cities that still exists. Its name today is Ismir and it sits on a wonderful harbor. Smyrna had a population of about 200,000

people. It was an important trading community because of its excellent harbor. It was a rich community. Above the town was an acropolis, a hill upon which was built several beautiful temples. One was a temple to the goddess of Rome. Another was a temple to the Emperor Tiberius. And there were others. In fact, the collection of these beautiful marble temples set upon this hilltop came to be known as the "Crown of Smyrna." Remember that for later on.

But if the community was prosperous and well off, the church of Smyrna was another matter. This was a church under great persecution. Verse 9: Jesus says, "I know your afflictions and your poverty...". First, afflictions. The word for that is "thlipsis" and it means a crushing pressure. The Smyrnan church was experiencing crushing persecution. Remember, Revelation was written in the mid 90's. Under the Emperor Diocletian much of the Christian church was experiencing persecution. But it appears that it wasn't just the Romans that were persecuting the Christians in Smyrna. Who else?

John describes them in verse 9: "I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan." Wow. Strong words. It appears that the Jewish community in Smyrna had violated their own religious laws. Historians suggest that the Jews had folded the worship of Zeus...a pagan god...into their own worship practices. They were violating the first commandment. And for some reason, these apostate Jews held a particularly strong hatred for the Christians.

In 168, the bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, an old man in his 80's, was burned at the stake because he would not recant his Christian faith. According to historians of the time, the Jews gathered sticks to help the Romans burn Polycarp. Shocking enough. But they gathered them on the Sabbath! They so despised the Christians that, again, they were willing to violate their own religious code in order to destroy one of their leaders.

The letter to Smyrna is a letter to folks who are suffering. Some of them were suffering terribly. And Jesus is telling them that some of them are going to suffer more...even to the point of death.

The letter to Smyrna also has our names on it. Everyone of us. One at a time. Dear Mark, Dear Stuart ...we are all in there. It is only a matter of the date. Everyone of us at some time in our life

will be in Smyrna. We will be suffering. We will face a trial of some sort. It may be a trial unto death. Our death or the death of one we love.

This is not the sort of letter we want to get. WE want to get the "Congratulations, you just won a million dollars" letter...and really have WON a million dollars. But a letter that foretells our suffering or persecution?

Our almost-four-year-old Cooper is very strong-willed. But he is also very courteous. Ask him to do something, eat something, wear something he doesn't want to do, eat or wear and he'll say, "No thank you." If you insist, he will repeat: "No thank you, no thank you, DADDY." One of our friends who babysat him last week said Cooper is the most polite disobedient child she has ever met.

But when we are find ourselves heading for Smyrna, we are just like Cooper. "No thank you. No thank you. NO THANK YOU, DADDY." But whether we welcome it or not, adversity will come. How do we face it?

First, **Remember that we have an enemy.** Jesus is very clear on the source of their persecution. Satan. The Devil. He mentions him twice. Now it may not seem very enlightened to believe in the existence of a real devil, but Jesus was convinced of his existence. So was Paul. So was Peter. So is John. If you ignore that reality, you do so at your own peril.

It is so hard for me to watch people like we did last Wednesday, trying to make sense of the death of a beloved high school coach in a senseless automobile wreck. I overheard folks saying things like, "God must have a losing team in heaven that he needs help with." I understand the sentiment behind that. We want to attach meaning to our suffering and loss. But the end result of that logic is that God grabbed that wheel and turned it into the tree. Or touched that skin and placed a melanoma on it. Or blew on that marriage and caused it to fall apart.

God is love. God is not the source of evil, sickness, death. God can certainly work within all those situations and he does. "All things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose." But he is not the author of evil.

If you are suffering adversity of some sort, please remember. We have an enemy who is a liar and a destroyer.

Second, **He is a defeated enemy**. Did you notice how long the persecution was going to last? Ten days. What does that mean? It probably means simply this: It will be a limited time. The persecution will not go on forever. In other words, even though we have an enemy in Satan, God has put limits on him. And though in a week when we have seen earthquake and death and disease seemingly running rampant, God has drawn a line and said, "This far and no farther." Ultimately, God will be victorious.

So... **Hang in there** That's really the encouragement we are given. Hang in there. Don't give up. Endure. Jesus says it two ways. In verse 10 he says, "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life." The word used here for crown is not like a king's diadem. It is the wreath that was given to the victor of a race. Like a marathon. In other words, keep running. Don't give up. And I will give you the crown of life. Do you remember the nickname for the acropolis with all the temples on it? Do you suppose this is a play on words? "Though you are suffering persecution within the shadow of the Crown of Smyrna, hang in there and I will give you the Crown of Life."

He says the same thing in verse 11: "He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death." What is the second death? This word only appears in the Revelation. Obviously, first death is the death our body dies. But I believe second death refers to what we will find later described in Rev. 20 as the fiery Lake of Judgement. And the sentence there uses a double negative for emphasis. "He who endures...overcomes ...hangs in there will never, ever be hurt at the time of judgment." In other words, no matter what this world dishes out, even to the point of death, those of us who belong to Jesus will only know eternal life.

Do you have any idea what this rope represents? Back in 1995, Rich Jasper, Tom Haass and I climbed Mt. Rainier. We were roped up together on a rope just like this one with our helmets and headlamps on. How many of you have climbed Rainier? It was the most exhausting, challenging thing I have ever accomplished. Rich had run a marathon and he said this was more difficult. We set out from Camp Muir, which was at 10,000 feet, at midnight after having slept a few hours.

We reached the summit about eight hours later. But you cannot know the sense of hopelessness that swept over me at about 12,000 feet. We were slogging along, one foot ahead of another, breathing deeply, stopping, stepping, breathing, stopping, stepping, breathing. It was all I could do to keep my wits about me as the oxygen-thin air began to take its toll on me. But I paused once to look above me. And there, weaving back and forth above me, were tiny little lights of climbers ahead of us. It seemed as if they stretched into infinity. And I thought, "How will we ever make it?" Yet we just kept slogging on, one step and breathe, one step and breathe, one step and breathe. Until finally, we were on top.

I was grateful for this rope. Grateful that I was not alone on that climb. Roped to my brothers who were there to encourage me and support me if I fell. This rope represents for me endurance as, together, my brothers and I faced and triumphed over a seemingly insurmountable adversity.

I don't know what you are facing but many of you are facing it, aren't you? Facing what seems to be an insurmountable adversity. Hang in there. Do not lose hope. Do not give up. Be faithful. Because you see, we belong to a Jesus who knows what it means not to give up. Listen to these words as we prepare for our communion together: Hebrews 12.2 "Let us fix our eyes on

Jesus, the author and "perfecter" of our faith, who for the joy set before him **endured** the cross, **scorning** its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
OVERCOMING ADVERSITY
Revelation 2:8-11

Pastor Mark Toone
October 3, 1999

- Notice the identification Jesus uses for himself in verse 8. How does that particular identification fit the Smyranean situation?
- Notice it says they are in poverty. Why is it more difficult to be poor in a rich community? Given what we read in the text, what are some reasons they might be poor? In what way does Jesus describe them as rich?
- What do we learn about the devil in this text? In what way is he powerful? In what way is he limited? What is the final chapter going to be for him? Why do you suppose so many have difficulty believing in a real devil?
- Share an example of endurance out of your own life. Did you think you might not make it? What did you learn from that situation?
- Discover if there are any who are suffering right now. Lift them up in prayer.