

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Last Sunday in Trinity, November 25, 2012

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 470, 279:1-2, 413, 227, 644.

Lessons: Daniel 7:13-14, Revelation 1:4-8, Matthew 25:31-46.

Sermon Text: Revelation 2:8-11.

Sermon by Pastor M. H. Eibs

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

The end of the church year is always a time for self-examination. We ask ourselves: have we been faithful to Christ and his Word? Have we put forth our best efforts in carrying on the work of the church in extending God's kingdom? Have we been faithful in our trials and tribulations? As we think of those questions we should keep in mind that the Lord knows the answer. He knows perfectly all we have done or left undone. We see this from the inspired Word of God in front of us. Therefore with the Holy Spirit's guidance Let us study our text and hear:

A MESSAGE FROM THE LORD OF THE CHURCH TO ALL BELIEVERS.

- 1. He knows our works and tribulations.**
- 2. He will test and try our faith with more tribulations.**
- 3. He will reward our faithfulness with a crown of life.**

The apostle John wrote according to the Revelation given to him by the Lord Jesus: ***"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."*** Smyrna is a city in Asia Minor, about 40 miles from Ephesus, one of seven cities to which Christ addressed letters or messages recorded in the book of Revelation. It is the only one of the seven cities which has retained its importance to the present time. It is now called Izmir in Turkey and is the third most populous city in Turkey with about 2,700,000 inhabitants.

The book of Revelation was written about 95 A.D. The message addressed to Smyrna is different from the messages to the other six churches in that no special fault is found with the church. This message also contains the familiar exhortation ***"Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life."*** ***"Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life."*** (KJV)

The letter is addressed to the whole congregation and in particular to the "angel". Remember angel equals messenger, who is the chief minister or pastor. The Lord addresses the pastor as the one who is responsible for the spiritual condition of the church. The Lord commanded St. John to write not what he felt he should write but the words that the Lord wanted him to write. St. John was his mouthpiece. Every word which St. John wrote was inspired by the Lord, and we properly call this 'verbal inspiration'.

Jesus calls himself ***"the First and the Last."*** These words express his eternity. There is none before him, there is none after him, for he is the eternal God himself. The fact that the eternal God wrote this message gives authority to its words. Jesus is the eternal God who became a true man to redeem us lost and condemned creatures from sin and death. The Lord of glory died for us on the cross, and he arose again from the tomb to live to all eternity. These words give us the comfort that he who belongs to Christ need not fear death and can be assured of life everlasting.

Jesus says ***"I know your afflictions and your poverty--yet you are rich!"*** The Lord was aware of the tribulations of the Christians at Smyrna. He knew of the persecution of pastor and people by the hostile unbelievers. But special mention is made of their poverty. Those who had possessions had lost them, likely having been taken from them by the authorities. And in general, Christians could not prosper greatly in

temporal things because of the hatred of the unbelievers. Such poverty is one of the afflictions that Christians sometimes have to bear. For when they see their property and money disappear, their means of making a living is gone, and they lack the ordinary necessities of life. Then their courage begins to fail, and they are tempted to yield their faith and give up the good fight of faith against Satan and the powers of evil. But the Christians at Smyrna did not complain, nor give up the battle against Satan, and for this the Lord commends them.

For their comfort the Lord adds the words ***“yet you are rich!”*** Though they were poor in earthly goods which perish, they were rich in spiritual blessings which abide for ever. What were their blessings? They had the kingdom of God in their midst, through the word of God that was preached to them. They were, as St. Paul says, ***“having nothing, and yet possessing everything.”*** (2 Corinthians 6:10) Above all they had a strong faith in their Lord and Savior. This is the wealth that the world fails to appreciate, and which Christians often undervalue greatly, but all other riches are as nothing compared to it.

The Lord mentions another tribulation, the blasphemy of the unbelieving Jews. ***“I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.”*** These were Jews like the ones who crucified Jesus. They mocked those who faithfully believed in Christ. Their mocking was a blasphemy against the precious faith of the Christians and was meant to hurt them personally. While these people who blasphemed against the Christians were actually Jews by birth, they were not God’s chosen people. They rejected the Savior whom God promised first to the Jews. Just their claim that they were Jews did not make them so, because they were doing the work of Satan. Jesus speaks of them as he did to the Jews in his day: ***“You belong to your father, the devil.”*** (John 8:44 NIV)

We see here how the Lord is not deceived by outward appearances. Mere claims do not count with him. He knows who are his own, and he knows who are his enemies. Blessed were the people of Smyrna for the Lord had no special criticism of them, as he had for the other six churches of Asia Minor. What about our congregation today? If the Lord were to address a special message to us today what would he say? Would he have words of praise for us or would he say as he did to the Ephesian church: ***“Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.”*** (Revelation 2:4) Would he regretfully say we were not concerned about purity of doctrine, or worse yet, would he speak like he did to the congregation at Sardis: ***“I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.”*** (Revelation 3:1 NIV) Let us always be mindful that the Lord knows our works, and let us comfort ourselves in this that he also knows our tribulations. But, as we continue with the Lord’s message in our text, we learn that he will test and try our faith with more tribulations.

2.

“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 Christians at Smyrna were admonished to continue in their faithfulness in the days to come. First they were told not to fear. No matter what would lie ahead for them they were not to be afraid. Believers in Christ are told not to fear about 300 times in the Scriptures. That tells us that the real purpose of the Bible is to give us that perfect comfort in Christ that casts out all fear.

Next the Christians at Smyrna were told that they would suffer yet greater tribulation. There would be a variety of persecutions and afflictions in store for them. All of the persecutions would come to them as a result of the devil’s evil work. The originator of all evil and sin is the devil. He sinned from the beginning. But the devil often uses men as his agents and tools to carry out his evil work. The devil would use the unbelieving Jews as well as Gentiles to bring trouble for the Christians.

One result of the persecutions would be that Christians would have to suffer imprisonment. Scripture gives no more details. Who would be cast into prison? Most likely the most influential members of the church, the members who most boldly confessed their faith before men, and especially the pastor would be in danger of imprisonment because he taught the truth that the unbelievers hated so much.

The Lord’s purpose in permitting this tribulation upon the Christians was to test their faith. The devil by persecutions seeks to make the Christians fall from faith. But the Lord uses the evil works of Satan to accomplish his own purpose which is to try the faith of the believers. After the Christian faith is tested, it will also be stronger to resist Satan.

The comforting assurance is given that the tribulations have a limit. The Lord tells them: ***“and you will suffer persecution for ten days.”*** When the Lord says 10 days he is speaking figuratively. He does not actually

mean only 10 days but he means a certain, set period of time. 10 is a symbolical number found especially in the books of Daniel and Revelation. All things are under the control of God. He sets bounds and limits beyond which even the devil cannot go. For example, the Lord permitted the devil to tempt Job only to a certain extent and he could not go beyond that set limit. To know that their tribulation would be limited was a comfort for the Christians. They could then prepare their hearts for the coming trials and know that if they would remain faithful they would win the victory over Satan.

As the early days of the Christian church were marked by severe tribulation, so the Lord tells us that the last days will also be severe. It is necessary for us to remember that ***“we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.”*** (Acts 14:22 KJV) It is for that reason that the Lord in the last part of our text exhorts us to faithfulness, and promises us a crown of life.

3.

“Be faithful, even to the point of 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. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.” When the Lord spoke of ***“the second death”*** to the Christians at Smyrna, he was not referring to their natural, temporal death. He was referring to death in hell.

To be faithful unto death means to hold fast to the Christian faith and confession without wavering or yielding. We have an excellent example from church history in faithfulness unto death. In about 156 A.D. a bishop of Smyrna, a pastor named Polycarp, was put to death. Polycarp had served as the pastor there for many years. He was a bold confessor of the truth. When he was 86 years old the heathen citizens tied him to a stake and burned him to death. When he was urged to recant and deny his Savior he said “4 score years and six I have served the Lord, and he never wronged me; how then can I blaspheme my King and Savior?” He remained faithful unto death. Should we not be found faithful in lesser trials and temptations with no actual martyrdom threatening us?

He that is faithful, he that overcomes, will receive a crown of life is the promise of Jesus. The crown of life is eternal life itself promised to all who are victorious in the trials of faith. The crown of life is not something we earn. It is a reward of God’s grace. We win it because Jesus first won life for us. And he makes us faithful to endure all things for his sake. And finally he himself takes us from the conflict of this life of tribulation to a life of glory and blessedness. St. James writes ***“Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.”*** (James 1:12 NIV)

Each of the seven letters addressed to the churches has the solemn appeal ***“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”*** The Lord wishes to deeply impress us with the truth of what he has spoken. He has his Holy Spirit give his message to Christians through the written word. Let us not close our ears and hearts to Christ’s message but let us hear and believe. If we are faithful unto death to Christ and his Word, the second death of eternal damnation will not harm us, but we shall live eternally. Let our prayer therefore be the hymn verse we have sung:

“Would to God that I might even
As the martyred saints of old,
With the helping hand of heaven,
Steadfast stand in battle bold!
Oh my God, I pray thee
In the combat Stay me.
Grant that I may ever be
Loyal, staunch, and true to thee. Amen.
(The Lutheran Hymnal 470:4)

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