

## **“Faithful Under Pressure”**

*Revelation 2:8-17*

**Introduction** – **SLIDE1** = “Pressure Tested”

This morning, as we continue in our series on Revelation (which is mainly about growing radical faith), we will be looking at people in two city churches that were undergoing various pressure tests. The pressures in life have a way of showing what we’re really made of don’t they. My family and colleagues can usually tell when I’m under pressure from my “stressed behaviours.” (I don’t remember as well or listen as well—a bad combination. I’m more easily irritated & apparently, more irritating; I withdraw & get silent when I should be speaking up. There are more but I don’t want to keep you here all day!)

### **Biblical Contact**

It is revealing to see the specific pressures the early Christians faced and how each responded to them (e.g. seeing how the people around us handle the pressures of life...Parenting pressures, time pressures, financial stresses). As we observe others we learn lessons of what to do, or not do. We see attitudes and actions that need either positive affirmation or constructive correction if we are going to shine for Christ where he has put us.

Turning to Revelation 2 we soon find that the evaluation each of the seven churches are given by Christ are both similar and distinct. Each one is given a personal custom-made message, yet they all have a **common outline** that serves an overarching purpose: to provide spiritual direction for people called by Christ to live “in the world” yet distinct from the world.”<sup>Jn.17</sup> As we saw last week, between Christ’s opening introduction and his concluding call to listen and obey, there are personal words of commendation, then critique, followed by Christ’s command backed up with appropriate and compelling promises. This is the basic framework you’ll find in the sermon outline as we now fill out the specifics.

When people come to me for guidance the first thing I need to do (if I am going to be of any help at all) is to try and understand the context and conditions in

which they are living. Are the causes of their distress or delight internal or external? Are there indicators of where or how God might be at work and what step or steps of faith are being called for to get & keep in sync with Him? **2:8-11**

**Smyrna** – was a particularly beautiful port city with a 150 metre high acropolis (plateau area) covered with temples and other buildings. People of the time referred to as “the crown of Smyrna”. Coins describe the city as “First of Asia in beauty and size.”<sup>Mounce,91</sup> It had a reputation of being the most loyal to Rome, the most patriotic of all the Asian cities.<sup>Fee,22</sup> In our day cities compete to host the Olympics. In their day they competed for the privilege of honoring emperor with a grand temple. The winner in this case was Smyrna because of her long history of loyalty to Rome. So it became the patriotic duty of each person to demonstrate their commitment to the emperor by their participation in several key worship celebrations each year (NOW = flying the flag and saying “we are all Canucks”; or joining in the end of the year Boxing Day frenzy; THEN = offering incense on Roman holidays & saying “Caesar is Lord”). The political pressure plus a large Jewish population that was actively hostile to the Christians made it very difficult **SLIDE4** to live as a Christian in Smyrna. Let’s look at this in a bit more detail.

**SLIDE5** **“your afflictions”** – The Greek word rendered “afflictions”<sup>singular</sup> (*thlipsis* = hard pressed, crushing weight.<sup>Yeatts,61</sup>) is the general word in the NT for trials and afflictions of all kinds.<sup>Fee,30</sup> They are being pressure tested in general you could say, but Christ also knows the specific ways they are being hard pressed.

- a) **“poverty”** (*ptochos*<sup>1</sup> vs. *penes*) = intense financial pressure given the specific word used and the experience of other Christians in the NT who were the victims of mob violence and looting (cf. Heb. 10<sup>32-35</sup> “*You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.*”)
- b) **“slander”** = extreme verbal & social pressure (from former associates/Jews)

<sup>1</sup> Trench’s oft-quoted distinction between the two Greek words for “poor” is helpful. “The *penes* has nothing superfluous, the *ptochos* nothing at all” (*Synonyms of the NT*, p. 129) quoted by Mounce, *Revelation*, p. 92.

A specific historical situation may explain the harshness of the persecution from the Jews in this particular city. Ancient records tell us that Jews had worked out a special deal with their federal government—agreeing to pay a special tax that then exempted them from imperial religious activities.<sup>2</sup> But by appealing to Roman authorities that “Christians say they are Jews but are not” they threw them under the political bus, “slandering” them, exposing them to Roman hostility. So those with the closest religious ties to their faith became their most bitter opponents. It can happen can’t it? A former friend or colleague or even family member can reject us because of our Christian convictions. We do well to remember that Jesus knows what facing extreme verbal & social pressure from people in your own home & hometown is like (Lk. 4<sup>28-29</sup>; Mk. 3<sup>21</sup>).

c) “**prison**” & “**persecution**” = forceful physical pressure<sup>3</sup> resembling the persecution of God’s people under slavery in Egypt (Ex. 3<sup>9</sup>; 4<sup>31</sup>) and their exile in Babylon (Dt. 4<sup>25-31</sup>). It has the same feel, the same smell,<sup>4</sup> the same ultimately demonic DNA that is still present in many parts of our world.

- e.g. Confiscation of property & imprisonment under communism in Russia & massive corruption in places like Colombia

In v.10 Christ says there is actually more suffering is in store for the Smyrnians at the hands of the devil. In the opening chapters of the OT book of Job we see the devil active in this kind of pressure testing. In the NT, Jesus refers to the devil as “a liar and the father of lies”<sup>Jn.8:44</sup> who actively opposes God’s work.

Yet God allows Satan to test the faith of these Christians, just as he allowed Satan to test the faith of Job. This may trouble us, but we need to keep in mind two things in this text that can help us remain faithful under pressure.

**First**, this is a “test” Christ allows in order “to prove” and “to improve” our faith

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<sup>2</sup> See John R. Yeatts, Revelation, p. 61 for details and references.

<sup>3</sup> In his commentary on Hebrews 10:32-24, F.F. Bruce gives extensive evidence of the kinds of persecution experienced in NT times. “Prisoners who had no means of their own were liable to starve unless their friends brought them food and whatever other form of help they required; throughout the whole age of imperial persecution of the church the visiting of their friends who were in prison was a regular, though dangerous, duty of Christian charity.” (Bruce, 270)

<sup>4</sup> John Yeatts draws attention to what he calls the “etymological connections between the name Smyrna and the word *myrrh*, a perfume used for embalming and symbolically connected with mourning.” Revelation, p.61.

(the word *peirázō* means both). Of course Satan does his best to tempt us to lose our faith, but Jesus uses these pressure tests to prove and improve our faith. A good test does that doesn't it! They are spiritually **RICH**. **SLIDE9**

**Secondly**, Christ underlines that he puts limits on these pressure tests. Just as God put limits on Satan's testing of Job (1<sup>10,12</sup>; 2<sup>6</sup>), so too the Smyrniants' affliction is limited to "ten days" (hold up 10 fingers). Ten days is a common set period of time in scripture (Gen. 24<sup>55</sup>; Jer. 42<sup>7</sup>; Dan. 1<sup>12-14</sup>; Acts 25<sup>6</sup>), it's a number used symbolically (rather than statistically) everywhere else in Revelation. The basic point is that while God allows temptations and testings, but he sets limits on them so we can overcome evil in his strength and not be overcome by it. <sup>1Cor.10:13</sup>

It is worth noting that the poverty of this church, and the great afflictions hurled against it, meant that outwardly the church would not have looked victorious or successful or "rich". They were not the place where church growth leadership conferences were being held. They were not the ones publishing and posting the latest and greatest Christian resources. They were not on the top ten, or even top one hundred donor lists in their provincial conference. And yet, this least "successful" looking church in the conference is the one church Christ commends as being spiritually enriched, so much so that this church receives only **commendation** <sup>SLIDE10</sup> by Christ and not a single word of critique.

And Christ, who introduced himself to them as the **Eternal and Invincible** one in v.8, concludes his message to them with the **offer of eternal and invincible life** to his faithful followers symbolized by the prized "victor's crown" given to the champions at the games. (*stephanos* = victor's crown vs. *diadema* = royal crown)

**Pergamum** (Read 2<sup>12-17</sup>) – The main part of the city was built on a high rock, a great acropolis that looked like a rock throne on which the **temples** of their deities had been built (like the great secular cathedrals of our day...Stadiums, Arenas, Malls). Being the capital city of Rome's eastern empire, Pergamum also was the "supreme court" except that the symbol of her judicial powers was a sword (since

Rome had given her “the right of the sword” to inflict capital punishment).<sup>Johnson,76</sup> Of the many temples, two on the crown of Pergamum were most famous. One was the temple to the god of healing, Asklepios (whose symbol was a serpent...explain).<sup>5</sup>

The other dominant temple on the hill was the one in honor of Zeus, the greatest of the Greek gods (“Zeus, the savior” as he was called) whose massive altar (the size of our sanctuary—6m high & 27m<sup>2</sup>) was built on a ledge jutting out from the hillside ¼ km above the street. The people literally lived in the shadow of superstition.

Surround this altar was the famous library of Pergamum with its huge collection of over 200,000 scrolls (the word “parchment” is derived from the name Pergamum). No wonder commentator Darrell Johnson says that “In every way Pergamum was a centre for ideas that blinded people to the truth—to the truth about God, about the world, about themselves.”<sup>p.78</sup>

Think about it. While the average tourist was taking in the sights, blissfully taking pictures of all these impressive expressions of idolatry, Jesus is grieving at how the deceiver had captured and poisoned the mind of the whole city; from politics to medicine to religion. No wonder he introduces himself as having the sharp, double-edged sword (symbolizing his supreme judicial & verbal power).<sup>SLIDE16</sup>

Friends, there was a major battle going on for the minds of the people of that city, a city where Jesus said, “Satan has his throne...where Satan lives.” Talk about a tough neighbourhood to live in...but a great place for a lampstand.

- Some of you in difficult families & workplaces & classrooms...take note of this!

**SLIDE17** Jesus commends the church for standing firm against the constant bombardment of ideologies and ideas and influences that were radically opposed to the gospel. They used **Jesus** titles (“Zeus...savior”, “Caesar...Lord”, “Asclepios...healer”), and made claims that only Jesus could deliver on. The fact there was even a church in Pergamum is a testimony to the power of the Jesus

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<sup>5</sup> To the Greeks snakes were sacred beings of wisdom, healing, and resurrection. In honor of Asclepius, a particular type of non-venomous snake was often used in healing rituals, and these snakes — the [Aesculapian Snakes](#) — slithered around freely on the floor in dormitories where the sick and injured slept. A touch from them was thought to be a touch from the god that would bring them health and healing. See Johnson, p. 78.

story, and proof of the power of His words & His ability to cut through all the layers of superstition and idolatry that had built up over the centuries and captivated the hearts and minds of so many people.

- Secular Ideologies (communism, atheism, materialism, humanism, etc.)
- Spiritual Ideologies (Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Individualism, etc.)

**SLIDE18** In Pergamum there were two main influences that “**some**” (not all) were being led astray by, “some” who held to the teaching of Balaam (Num. 25<sup>1-2</sup>; 31<sup>16</sup>) and the teaching of the Nicolaitans (cf. v.6). We know from Christ’s letter to the church in Ephesus that the Nicolaitans had been tested and then rejected by them, but they had found a foothold in the church at Pergamum. **SLIDE19**

- The new Nicolaitan enticement was like the old Balaam one (Num. 25<sup>1-3</sup>; 31<sup>16</sup>) and sounds very similar to the one that caused so much trouble in Corinth (1 Cor. 5-7<sup>immorality</sup> and 8-10<sup>eating food sacrificed to idols</sup>) **SLIDE20**

Basically they believed “sex” was simply a biological urge, an appetite to be fed like any other appetite, therefore they believe a person could get his or her sexual needs satisfied without becoming personally involved or impacted.

We too have seen how “sex” has been reduced to an appetite. Many people “test-drive” a relationship like they would “test-drive” a car, so they get in bed together & live together before deciding if they want to invest in it permanently.

- “There is no such thing as casual sex, no matter how casual people are about it...Nobody can go to bed with someone and leave his soul parked outside...The demand for self-restraint is not a kill-joy rule plastered on the abundant life by anti-sexual saints. It is respect for reality. The moral law fits the inner reality of sex.” (Lewis Smedes, Johnson, p. 84)

How did the Balaamite-Nicolaitan teachings and practices even get through the door of the church in Pergamum? The same way it gets through the door today. They presented falsehoods as “alternative facts.” They also normalized their beliefs and behaviours and portraying any restrictions as oppressive (“natural” instincts must be God-given). They also played down the differences between what they taught and what the Bible taught, after all, “what really matters is whether people love one another” however they choose to express



that love. And after all, “God loves you so it doesn’t really matter what you do. Nothing can affect your relationship with him.” Right? Or wrong? It takes discipline & discernment to do what the Ephesian church did when they “tested” these kind of teachers & teachings and “found them false” (2<sup>2</sup>). There is more that could be said on this, but I’ll leave that for Dave if he wants to tackle it in next week’s message.

**Christ’s Command** = *“Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and fight against them with the sword of my mouth.”* The main issue is not “is Christ on my side” but “am I on Christ’s side”. (cf. Joshua 4 <sup>13</sup>*Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, ‘Are you for us or for our enemies?’ <sup>14</sup>‘Neither,’ he replied...”*)

**Christ’s Call** & **Closing Promise** to the overcomers. Manna = the bread of heavenly that had been “hidden” or stored away in the temple in the ark of the covenant (Ex. 16<sup>31ff.</sup>; cf. 2 Mac. 2<sup>4ff.</sup>) as a testimony and to be made available in the messianic age. “He is saying to us, why are you fooling around eating at the tables of lesser gods, when you can come to me and eat food that truly satisfies?”<sup>6</sup> White stone<sup>7</sup> = acquittal, admission and access to the heavenly messianic banquet. New name = known by Christ who gives us a new character (e.g. “Jacob” renamed “Israel” Gen. 32; cf. Abram/Abraham, Simon/Peter, etc.).

### **Implications**

- Jesus gives “getting stoned” a whole new meaning...
- Pick up a white stone & carry it with you to remember what’s at stake.

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<sup>6</sup> Darrel Johnson, Discipleship On The Edge, p. 85.

<sup>7</sup> Mounce mentions that “There are a dozen or more plausible interpretations” (p.99). (1) ancient jurors signified innocence or acquittal by casting a white stone into an urn; (2) white stones were used for admission into festivals & banquets, (3) a stone on the breastplate of the high priest (Ex. 28<sup>30</sup>)...access to God, (4) Thracian custom of marking every good day by a white stone. (5) When two friends parted they would divide a white stone in half and give it to each other...A promise to maintain their friendship as long as the stone lasted. (6) White stone was given to the victor at games, and to popular gladiators who retired.