

“The Living Fruit Diet: Peace”

Romans 6:1-6 and Revelation 2:8-11

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I came across an interesting study recently. According to a national poll taken by the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research only two people in ten in America today say they feel hopeful about the future. Only two in ten! And the research gets even more interesting. For five years ago in a comparable survey, seven in ten felt hopeful about the future. That's a drop of 50% in five years. Quite a change, isn't it?

But then the last five years haven't exactly been easy have they? The researchers decided to go a little further. They asked people why? Why they were more fearful now than five years ago? And just as you might have anticipated, there was a wide variety of answers. Some people were afraid because of what's happening in the world; afraid of the threat of terrorism, or afraid of a natural disaster..

Other people had fears that were closer to home. They were afraid of losing their job, or of not having enough money for retirement. Some had fears for their families. They feared their children were growing up in a pretty scary world. Some had fears for themselves, for their physical or emotional health. The list of specific fears cited by people who participated in the poll actually went on for almost a full page.

But beyond all the specific fears the research pointed towards something else, towards a more basic reason why people are more fearful in 2012 than they were in 2007. And it was surprisingly simple. In fact you can summarize it, the researchers said, in a single word: pressure.

People feel strongly that their lives are being lived today under tremendous pressure; pressure produced by uncertainty in the world, in the economy, in our personal lives. And all that uncertainty is producing a kind of pressure against peace in us, a kind of pressure that pushes us toward fear.

The pressure of living in an uncertain world, a world we can't always control, and the fear that results from that. Fear and pressure, pressure and

fear; they go together, don't they? And it's interesting because both those words are found on Jesus' lips in Revelation 2 as he dictates a letter that he wants John to send to a group of Christians in a place called Smyrna.

"I know your tribulations," Jesus says. And the word He uses is a Greek word *thlipsis*. And the word can be translated in a variety of ways. It can be translated to mean "tribulations, anxieties, or even pressures" I know what's going on in your life. I know the circumstances you're living with. I know the pressures you're under and the fears that come out that. But then he says, "Don't be afraid, don't be afraid."

So there they are, both words, linked up again, but this time not in a poll but a letter, a letter written to some Christians in Smyrna, which is the last place in ancient world where you would think fear and the pressures would be on anyone's mind. You see Smyrna was and still is a beautiful city on the southwest coast of Turkey. Today it's called Izmir. It's built around the foothills of a mountain, Mt. Pagas, and it's a city where gentle hills full of amazing views of the Mediterranean lead down to a beach and a safe harbor.

In ancient times, it was so impressive that it was called the "crown of Asia." It was one of the most desirable places in the whole world to live. In fact, on coins that were minted in the city they inscribed these words, "Smyrna, first in Asia in beauty." It was a community filled with theatre and music, philosophy and literature flourished. And it was full of educated, cultured people. To give you just one example, Homer, the great poet author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* was born in Smyrna.

The city had a thriving economy. Immigrants came to Smyrna from every direction, and there were a number of successful businesses there. It was one of the model cities of the Roman Empire. And the citizens of Smyrna were very proud of that. In fact it was often said that no other city in Asia was as devoted to Rome as Smyrna.

In 195 B.C., even before Rome became a superpower, Smyrna built a temple to *Dea Roma* (the goddess that is Rome). It was the first city in Asia to do anything like that. And the Romans never forgot it. In 23 A.D. the city built a temple to Caesar Augustus and two years later the citizens competed for the right to build a temple in honor of Tiberius. They won the competition over seven other cities. And they celebrated by not only building a temple

for Tiberius but building another one for his wife the Empress Lydia and a third one for the Roman Senate..

But this deep devotion to Rome became deadly for Christians living in Smyrna in the last half of the first century. For anything the emperor hated, the people of Smyrna hated, and for emperors like Nero and Domitian, Christians were objects of scorn. Anyone who refused to swear allegiance to the emperor or worship in his temple was seen as a terrorist in the making, a threat to the empire. So nowhere in the first century, was it more dangerous to be a follower of Jesus Christ than it was in the “crown” city of Smyrna, first Asia in beauty and in loyalty to Rome.

Oh, by the way, did you notice how Christ begins his letter to the church there? Look again at what He says. “These are the words of Him who is ... what?” The first! Interesting, isn’t it? To a city that called itself “first.” to people who gave their first loyalty to Rome, Jesus writes a letter to his church and he starts it by reminding them that what’s first in their lives isn’t a city or an empire but a Savior.

“I’m the first,” Jesus says, and “I’m the last.” I was here before the city Smyrna ever existed. I was here before Rome rose to power. I’ll be here after the empire falls. So don’t forget. Don’t forget who comes first. Because knowing who comes first is part of the secret of finding peace in a world full of uncertainty. And then he says more.

“I know your afflictions,” Jesus says. I know your *thlipsis*, the pressures you’re living with. I know about those. And he does. Jesus knows the pressures his people live with. So tell me, what’s the pressure gauge in your life reading right now? Is it on low? Because if it is, I’m happy for you! And Jesus is too. And there’s actually a completely different word in the Bible for that kind of low level pressure that kind of pressure that doesn’t cause us too much trouble, the kind of pressure we can keep under control.

Or maybe the pressure gauge in your life has been climbing lately? Is it inching up? Is it moving toward the point where you can’t keep out of your thoughts, because every time you push it out of your thoughts it keeps coming back to you? Does the source of pressure in your life seem like it’s getting a little bit beyond your control?

I grew up with a boy who lived up the street from me. His name was Scott Staley. It's a little scary that I can still remember his first and last name after more than fifty years. But I can and the reason I can is because Scott Staley was a major cause of *thlipsis* for me. He put pressure on me that I couldn't control. You see Scott was bigger than me. And he liked to pick on me. And just knowing he lived on the same street as me put pressure on me. I tried to avoid him. I tried to befriend him. I tried to fight him. But he won. And when he would wrestle me to the ground, lie down on top of me, call his friends to pile on until I was convinced I might not be able to breathe. I thought they were going to crush me.

And that's *thlipsis*. It's a crushing pressure. And you can't escape it. It's a kind of fear that you can't control because it always seems to be in control of you. But Jesus says, "Don't be afraid. I know about that kind of pressure." Listen to what he tells the Christians at Smyrna. "I know there are forces in the city where you live that you can't control. I know there are people right now you who are threatening you, slandering you. I know," says Jesus. But there's a way for you to find peace. You don't have to be afraid!"

And in his letter to the church at Smyrna Jesus gives the reason. Here it is. You don't have to be afraid because Jesus has been where you are now. He's been under the pressure of *thilipsis*.and faced into its fears. Ann Graham Lotz, Billy Graham's daughter writes so well about this in her book on Revelation called, *The Vision of His Glory*. Listen to what she writes

"Don't be afraid. Why not? Because there's someone who understands you personally, who's experienced what you are going through. There's someone who has been there before you, who's been there first. And you don't need to be afraid because whatever pressures you're under, whatever suffering you're experiencing now or sensing in your future, you will not have to go through it alone. Jesus will be there for you. He'll be with you.

You see one of the most fearful things about fear is the sense of aloneness, the sense that in that moment when the pressure whatever it is threatens to crush you, you are alone, totally alone. Fear feeds on that, on a sense of abandonment, a sense that there's no one who can help you, a sense that you're facing your *thilipsis* alone. But it's not true. It's never true.

For there's one who's promised to be with you always, even to the end of the ages, and he's able to keep that promise, to stay with you, through every

moment, through every part of your personal experience of *thilipsis*. He has the power to do that. And he's determined to do that. He will not you go through this alone.

So don't be afraid my friends. If you belong to Jesus Christ, if you have invited him into your life, don't be afraid. He will be there with you. He will never leave you to face a pressure that you believe is going to overwhelm you alone. He will not abandon you to your fear. He will be with you. Reach out for him and you'll sense it. Pray to him, talk to him and he'll tell you it's true.

Your situation may not change. But if you reach out to him, if you talk to him, you will still hear him say to you, "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give my peace to you." And when he says it, you'll know. The peace comes from the presence. And the presence of Jesus Christ in your life is something that no situation, no *thilipsis*, no pressure no matter how intense it gets can take away from you. Not if you let the Holy Spirit remind you don't have to face it alone.

"These things I've told you," Jesus reminded his disciples at his last meal with them, "while I am with you. And the counselor, the Holy Spirit, the one the Father will send to you, he will teach you even more about this. In fact he will bring the truth about me and everything I've said to you back to you when you most need to remember it." That's why Paul writes that peace is another piece of the fruit of the Spirit. It's another part of the living fruit diet that God wants us to live by.

There's a wonderful story about this that comes from a little later in the second century. The head of the church in Smyrna at that time was a man named Polycarp. He was probably ordained by John. Probably the same John who wrote those words in his gospel ordained Polycarp.

Anyway, by the middle of the second century he was an old man, and he was brought by the vote of the citizens of Smyrna into the arena one day. And the governor, the Roman proconsul in Smyrna said to Polycarp, "If you don't renounce Christ this day, you will die. Worship Caesar however, and you will live."

And at that moment Polycarp felt the pressure of *thilipsis* press on him, probably in a way that he had never felt it before. And he should have been fearful, but instead he was faithful. He should have felt pressure but instead

he felt the presence of his Savior and the peace that comes from the presence.

And this is what Polycarp said, "Eighty and six years I have served Jesus. And he has done me no wrong. How can I renounce my King who has saved me? You threaten me with a fire that burns for a time and is quickly quenched. But you do not know the fire which awaits the wicked and the judgment to come. What are you waiting for? Come, do what you will." And Polycarp was killed that day. But it is said that he died with a peace that amazed those who killed him.

Do you know that peace? It is a peace Paul says that passes all understanding. But it is a peace that comes from knowing that since we are justified when we put our faith in Christ, we have a peace that comes from knowing he will never leave us alone.

Let's pray ...