

Faithful Unto Death

Revelation 2:8-11
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This morning we will study a passage together from the book of Revelation. As you may know, in Revelation chapters 2 and 3, Jesus writes seven letters to seven different churches. Some of the letters have positive and encouraging parts, but most of them have a rebuke and a call to repent.

What is the role of suffering in the Christian life? Do you have a good understanding of suffering? You need to. There are some preachers out there who say Christians should be rich and successful. There are even men and women today who claim to be apostles, and they spread this message of prosperity and health. They have no theology of suffering. You might be thinking, "I don't believe in that health/wealth/prosperity gospel." But I think many, perhaps most, American evangelicals have a misguided belief that if I'm a pretty good Christian, God will give me a pretty good life. And that's why many American evangelicals leave the church, and leave Christianity, when they face suffering. They think God owes them better.

Church, we will see this morning, that we need to be ready for suffering. We need to be ready for persecution. Millions of our brothers and sisters around the world are suffering for their faith today, including some of you. Or you could be next. Let's face it: biblical Christianity is becoming more and more rejected in the United States. In the next decade or two, it's most likely that the church will continue to face more and more persecution. Are you ready? Can you handle it? Will you be faithful through the test?

Let's read the text... Jesus's letter to the church in Smyrna, and see what God has to say to us.

Revelation 2:8-11¹

⁸*And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: "The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.*

⁹*"I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹He 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."*

This is the Word of the Lord.

So imagine you go to the post office and receive a letter from Jesus. You are thrilled! A letter from Jesus to you! Or a letter from Jesus to our church. I think most of us imagine a letter from Jesus to us would tell us how much he loves us, or what our calling is, what our purpose is. We imagine Jesus as our encouraging buddy. But in Revelation chapter 1, John sees a vision of Jesus. John is the apostle Jesus loved, and yet, when he sees Jesus in all his glory, he doesn't give Jesus a friendly fist bump, saying, "Hey bud." John falls on his face as though dead. He said Jesus's eyes were like a flame of fire and his voice was the roar of many waters. So this isn't a sweet love letter with a heart sticker on the envelope. This isn't a pen pal. This is the Lord of the universe speaking to his people. So the churches in Revelation, and us today, need to recognize who this Jesus is.

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

This morning we will look at three sections in this text. We will look at what Jesus knows, what Jesus commands, and what Jesus rewards.

WHAT JESUS KNOWS

The first section we will look at today is what Jesus knows. It's the "I know" section. These are Jesus' first words in all of the seven letters to the churches: "I know." He knows everything! In some of the letters, it's good news to the church that he knows, and in some of the letters, it's bad news to the church that he knows. For example, in the letter to Sardis in chapter 3, Jesus says, "I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead." So Jesus has no encouragement for Sardis. What about you? Is it good for you or bad for you that Jesus knows every single detail in your life?

But here in Smyrna, what Jesus knows is actually an encouragement to the church. He says three things that he knows about the church in Smyrna...their tribulation, their poverty, and the slander being spoken against them. In this case, when the church in Smyrna reads these words, they would feel encouraged.

To understand the tribulation, poverty, and slander the Christians were facing, it's helpful to know a little more about the city of Smyrna. Smyrna was one of the greatest cities in the Roman Empire in the first century. It was beautiful, it was rich, it was clean. Many people called Smyrna, the "first of Asia," meaning they thought it was the best city in Asia. The first. It was also known as a faithful city, because it was faithful to Rome very early in the Roman Empire, back in 195 BC. So it was often called the faithful city, because it was so loyal and faithful to Rome for so long. And there was a hill that stood on the edge of the city, with buildings around the hill that caused it to look like a crown shape. Like a crown. So Smyrna was often referred to as the "crown of Smyrna." This was a powerful, wealthy city in the first century Roman Empire.

Why then, in such a nice, rich city, would Christians be in tribulation and poverty? Because of Smyrna's loyalty to Rome, it was expected that everyone in the city worship the Roman gods and the Roman emperor. Romans were supposed to burn incense to the emperor and declare that "Caesar is Lord." Christians were unwilling to declare Caesar as their Lord, and so they often faced persecution, especially in a city so faithful to Rome in the first century. Some of the persecution was financial, causing the Christians to be in poverty, even though the city was rich. And there were other kinds of tribulation for not worshipping the emperor or the Romans gods.

The Christians faced persecution from another side as well. In the text, it says they faced slander from those who said they were Jews. The Jews in Smyrna were somehow spreading false reports about the Christians. This is possibly because some Jews had converted to Christianity in Smyrna. Imagine that you are ethnically a Jew, and you put your faith in Jesus, and then your ethnic group and culture turn against you. Many Christians, and perhaps some of you, face that today. That's what it was like for many Jewish Christians in the first century. And then also in some cities, Jews were overly loyal to Rome. It was common in many parts of the Roman Empire that Jews were compromising their worship of God out of loyalty to Rome. Remember when Jesus was on trial before his death, the Roman leader Pilate, asked the Jewish leaders in John 19:15, "shall I crucify your king?" and the chief priests answered, "we have no king but Caesar." So the Christians in Smyrna are facing similar persecution as Jesus.

So in some way, the Jews were spreading slander about the Christians. Later in the second century, Jews in Smyrna helped lead Christians to their deaths. This is why Jesus calls the Jews in Smyrna a “synagogue of Satan” in verse 9. These are not the true people of God. They are working for the enemy. The true Israel, or the true people of God, are those who received the Son of God as their Savior. Followers of Jesus are the people of God.

One quick comment here. Some Christians have interpreted these New Testament passages to mean that Jews today are our enemies. That is not correct. There are debates among Christians about how to view the modern nation of Israel, but we certainly should have no sense of racism against Jews or any other anti-Jewish sentiment. After all, John, who wrote Revelation, was a Jew. Jesus was a Jew. Today, we should love Jews and treat them with all dignity and respect, just like anyone else. And we should pray for Jews to trust Jesus as their Savior.

So we see here in this letter that the Smyrnan Christians are facing persecution from the Jews, the Romans, and ultimately from Satan himself. Satan is attacking them. This is not just a human attack or human persecution. This is the enemy seeking to destroy God’s people.

What an encouragement verse 9 must have been for the Smyrnans, to hear that Jesus knows. I think when they read this, they would have said, “Oh good. Jesus knows. He knows what we are going through. He knows our poverty. He knows our tribulation. He knows the slander...all those bad things that people are saying about us that are not even true. He knows. Thank you Jesus, you know.”

Brothers and sisters, we too face persecution. At our church in Abu Dhabi, we have brothers and sisters who have lost jobs because they are Christian. Or they are paid less because they are a Christian. There is an Indian woman in our church whose family hasn’t talked to her for years because she became a Christian. There are other Christians whose families are trying to force them to marry people of their traditional religions. This persecution is very real for many people around the world, and we see it all the time in my church. What a comfort that Jesus knows.

It’s real here too. Some of you have been mocked and ridiculed and looked down upon for being a Christian. Some of you have faced family rejection, friend rejection, or financial challenge for being a Christian. Some of you have made great sacrifices as a Christian. Jesus knows. It may feel like Jesus is far away from us as we suffer, but he’s not. He knows. He sees what you are enduring for his sake. Rest in the fact that he knows.

WHAT JESUS COMMANDS

So let’s go on to what Jesus commands the Smyrnans and us to do when we face tribulation and suffering. We see two commands in the text.

Do not fear.

First, Jesus says “Do not fear.” Do not fear...what you are about to suffer. Jesus knows they are going to continue to suffer. It’s not over. Jesus is not going to rescue them yet. We often pray and hope that Jesus will deliver us NOW from our trials, but he does not promise that to Smyrna or to us. The devil is going to throw some of them in prison. And Jesus says that for ten days they will have more tribulation.

Now remember, in the book of Revelation, there is a lot of symbolism and imagery that is not always to be read literally. Here, the ten days is not necessarily an exact ten days. It is more likely a symbol that their suffering will be of a limited amount of time. It will not last forever. Jesus is not going to end the tribulation immediately, but it will end. Smyrna does not need to count the days down...”Ok eight days left, four days left.” The point is that they would be encouraged that their suffering will end. It will not last forever. So do not fear.

Why are we often so afraid of suffering today? Especially us Americans? As a whole, I think the American Church is severely lacking in courage. We are afraid of even a little bit of suffering, while our brothers and sisters around the world are suffering far worse, with even more courage. This is a command from Jesus: do not fear. But we often do everything we can to avoid suffering. Or we act surprised if suffering comes to us. Why? The New Testament is clear that suffering is common for Christians. Look at a few of these verses. John 15:18-20: “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.” And 2 Timothy 3:10-12: “You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra—which persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me. Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”

Brothers and sisters, in most of the church in most of the world in most of church history, there has been persecution for Christians. This is true today. Think about the world today. Persecution of Christians is increasing. In China, Christians are seeing church buildings burned to the ground. Christians are facing increased suffering there. Many of you know I used to do missions in China. In the last two years, almost all of my missions friends and teammates were kicked out of the country. And they have many stories of Christians in China in prison, right now. In India, Christians are seeing church buildings burned to the ground. Christians are facing increased suffering there. That’s one third of the world in those two countries. As I said earlier, here in the West, Christians are increasingly rejected by the culture, facing mocking and increased persecution. So in the three most populated countries of the world...China, India, and the US, Christians are less and less welcome in the culture. And certainly, I could mention other countries.

So what is Jesus’s message for suffering Smyrnans and for persecuted disciples? Do not fear. Brothers and sisters, I don’t know if tomorrow you will face blessing or suffering, I don’t know if you will have a mountaintop or a valley tomorrow. But I can tell you with confidence, if you’re following Jesus, then Satan is trying to attack you, and you will suffer, and you will probably face persecution in your lifetime. Some of you face it right now. Do not fear. Do not fear.

Be faithful unto death.

Jesus’s second command in this text is to be faithful unto death. That’s in verse 10. Be faithful unto death. I think Jesus is very clever here, because Smyrna is known as the faithful city to Rome, and Jesus is telling his people to be faithful, not to Rome, but to him, even to death. Some Smyrnans will die for Jesus. Their ten days of suffering will end not in miraculous opening of the prison doors, but in death. In fact, in the Roman Empire, imprisonment did not last long. They usually did not hold prisoners for five years or ten years like many of our countries do today. Imprisonment often led to

a quick death penalty. We know that Smyrnan Christians faced death, because the famous disciple Polycarp was killed in Smyrna in the year 156.

Polycarp was the bishop of the church in Smyrna at that time. He was also a disciple of the apostle John. He was one of John's followers. And at the age of 86, Polycarp was taken on a Sabbath day, and burned at the stake for refusing to burn incense to the Roman emperor. This is an old man. A man who had lived through a lot. Listen to what the old man, the 86-year-old man, Polycarp said, "Eighty and six years I have served Christ, and he has never done me wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"

Could you do it? Could I do it? Sometimes I wonder about this question. Would I really die for Jesus? Would you? If your life was threatened for the name of Jesus, would you deny Jesus, or die for Jesus? Deny or die? I hope this doesn't happen to us. But it might. Are you ready? Do you really believe in Jesus that you can be faithful unto death? Some of us can't even be faithful unto attending church. Or giving up some stupid sin in our lives. Most of us will not face death for our faith, though it is interesting that more people have been killed in church in the USA than in the UAE in the last decade. So who knows, right? But even if we don't face death...what about when your boss asks you to cheat some numbers, will you deny Jesus and cheat? Or will you be faithful, even to losing your job? If your friend mocks you for having a biblical view on babies or marriage, will you stand firm on God's Word, or deny it? If your family says they will never speak to you again, will you deny Jesus to keep a relationship with your family? Or will you be faithful unto losing your family? When your neighbors or co-workers ask you, "You don't really believe Jesus is the only way, do you?" Will you deny Jesus? Or be faithful?

WHAT JESUS REWARDS

How can we as Christians be so faithful, to face such hard things? How do we do it? Jesus tells us in this letter to Smyrna. We've looked at what Jesus knows, what Jesus commands, and now we will look at what Jesus rewards. Jesus promises us great rewards if we are faithful. Look at all the great rewards and encouragements that he gives. These are probably the words that encouraged Polycarp to stay faithful.

First, in verse 8, Jesus reminds them who he is. He is the first and the last. Smyrna, you may think you are the first of Asia, but no Jesus is the first, and the last. He is eternal. He is God. There is no one before him or after him. Satan is not first. Smyrna is not first. Our countries today are not first or last. Kings and kingdoms on this earth rise and fall. Jesus is first and last. When we recognize who Jesus is, we do not fear.

And as Jesus calls them to be faithful unto death, Jesus says a lot more about death and life. Again in verse 8, he tells them he died and came to life. Jesus knows how to endure death. Jesus's death is what paid for our sins. Jesus's death and resurrection is our hope. How do we endure suffering? Remember Jesus endured suffering, and he rose! Jesus's great reward for us is he died for our sins, and he gives us forgiveness.

Wang Yi is a pastor in China who was arrested for his faith just last year. He prepared a letter for the world to read if he was arrested. Here is a quote from that letter... "There is a higher authority than their authority, and there is a freedom that cannot be held by them, full of Jesus Christ...The church that died and was resurrected."

Wang Yi understood that just as Jesus died and was raised, so too are we! We have died to our old self. We have been raised to new life in Christ. We no longer live for ourselves, but for him. This truth empowers us to endure whatever suffering comes our way. I looked today for an update on Wang Yi on the internet, and I could not find anything, so I assume that he is still in prison in China today. Pray that he would be faithful unto death, and encouraged by Jesus's words.

In verse 10, Jesus tells the Smyrnans more about the reward of life. He says be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. Smyrna, you may be a beautiful city that even looks like a crown. But the crown of Smyrna is worthless. The crown of Smyrna will perish and die. The crown of life from Jesus is eternal and precious. This is the reward that all of us have, that Jesus one day would say "well done good and faithful servant." And give us the crown of life. This means that though we die, we will have life, eternal life with him forever. So they can burn our bodies now. They can hang our bodies on crosses now. They can explode our bodies into a million pieces now. But we have life. Jesus gives us a crown of life. I would rather have the crown of life than every golden crown that this world could give me. I'd rather have the crown of life, than be the richest, most powerful man on earth. I'd rather have the crown of life, and be a prince or a princess of the almighty King forever, than lose it all for the sake of some temporary sin, some idolatry, some vain pursuit of money, pleasure, or power in this short life.

Finally in verse 11, Jesus tells us one more reward. He says that "the one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death." There is a death that is far worse than the death of our bodies in this life. There is a second death. God tells us more about it later in Revelation. Look at these verses from Revelation chapter 20:13-15: "And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."

Friends, according to the Bible, if you do not know Jesus, then you will be thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, to be eternally separated from God, under the punishment for your sin. Jesus tells us here in our text tonight, that he who conquers will not be hurt by the second death. We conquer by knowing Jesus. By following Jesus. By repenting of our sins and trusting in Jesus's death. Jesus's death gives us eternal life, instead of eternity in second death, in the lake of fire. Jesus suffered death and punishment so that you would receive life. Would you receive his gift to you? Why not?

And church, I don't know what tomorrow will bring. But I do know that Christians should be ready for suffering and persecution. We see it happening in our world. It is reality for many Christians. When you face the suffering, how will you respond? Remember Jesus's words to the church of Smyrna. He knows your suffering. He tells you "do not fear" and "be faithful." And he has a crown of life for you that no one can take away.

I'll close with a few more words from Pastor Wang Yi in China from one of his sermons in 2017, as he was expecting to be arrested soon: "In this world, in this crooked, depraved and perverse world, how do we demonstrate that we are a group of people who trust in Jesus? It is through bodily submission, through bodily suffering, that we demonstrate the freedom of our souls."

Don't be afraid church. It's a time for courage in the American Church. It's a time for courage in the global church. When we suffer, without fear, with courage, with confidence in our Lord Jesus who is

reigning over the universe, it helps the gospel to spread. People see our hope for eternal life, our desire for something more, and they want it. Persecution may be getting worse, but the gospel is spreading all over the earth at the same time. Gospel suffering and gospel spreading often go together. If tomorrow is a day of blessing, praise God. If tomorrow is a day of suffering and persecution, praise God. The crown of life is coming.