

Suffering

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[0 : 00] Thanks so much, John. Do have your Bibles open at Revelation chapter 2 or your phone switched on if you prefer. If you're at home and you don't have a Bible, maybe grab one off the bookshelf or Google Revelation chapter 2 verses 8 to 11.

I'm sure it'll come up. As you do that, let me ask a question, potentially quite a challenging question. What would it take for you to deny your faith in Jesus?

How much would you have to go through? What would you have to face? If your life was on the line, would you deny him then?

It's the challenge of our passage today. Halfway through verse 10, you might have noticed it. It said, be faithful even to the point of death. In 2015, Christopher Mercer walked into Oregon Community College.

You might remember seeing it in the news. He walked into a classroom and he began pointing a gun at those in the room. He asked them one by one whether they believed in Jesus Christ.

[1 : 06] If they said yes, he shot them point blank in the head. Nine refused to deny Jesus. Nine died.

Our brothers and sisters all over the world face awful persecution, sometimes even to the point of death. Maybe you're sat there in this warm church or on your comfortable sofa at home.

Maybe you're thinking, well, of course I'd stand for Jesus. And whether or not that is true, the reality is the persecution that we face here is not the same sort of persecution, even to the point of death, that is, that our brothers and sisters might be facing elsewhere.

But imagine with me, just imagine for a second that something similar did happen here. Right now, someone walked through the doors at the back of this church.

They pointed a gun at me, asked me to deny my faith, and then pointed a gun at each of you and asked you one by one whether you believed in Jesus Christ.

[2 : 12] What do you do? It's a serious issue. Our salvation could be at stake in this. In Matthew chapter 10, verse 33, Jesus said, Whoever disowns me before others, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.

So in our passage today, in Revelation chapter 2, John writes this letter from Jesus to this church in Smyrna, and he says, persecution and suffering is coming to that church.

That'll be our first point today. We're going to dive headfirst into that persecution and suffering. And whether or not they're going to be faithful in that suffering is central. So Jesus also offers two ways to help them walk faithfully through that persecution and suffering.

That'll be our final two points. He says, lay hold of Jesus in verse 8, and he says, lay hold of heaven in verses 10 and 11. So first, let's have a look at that persecution and suffering described in verses 9 and 10.

See how Jesus begins verse 9, I know your afflictions. Each of these seven letters, the letters that we're looking at in this series, they contain that phrase.

[3 : 27] Because Jesus knows each of these churches intimately. And here he says, I know your afflictions. I know what it is that you are facing. Now, Smyrna was an important, thriving city port.

It was the closest port to Europe in that part of the world at the time. And it's where it gets its name from. It was known for its trade in that extremely valuable perfume, myrrh.

So it might come as a bit of a surprise then that Jesus says that he knows their poverty. Smyrna was a wealthy trading city. Why would the Christians there be impoverished? Well, Smyrna was also a Roman city, part of the Roman Empire, and its citizens were therefore duty-bound to take part in the worship of the Roman state.

And not doing so, not taking part in this cult worship, would have resulted in exclusion from things like trade guilds and public life. And so these Smyrna Christians found themselves in poverty because they stood up for Jesus and refused to worship anyone or anything else.

So I wonder, if your job security or your income was on the line, would you deny Jesus? Say you've been invited to dinner by your new boss.

[4 : 48] You know that there's a potential promotion coming up at work, and your boss doesn't know you're a Christian yet. They go off on one about how judgmental and hypocritical Christians are, how religion is just so harmful and obviously untrue and archaic.

In that moment, you have a choice. Do you shrink back, gulp, say nothing, or maybe even agree with your boss, and in doing so, deny your Savior, Jesus?

Or do you stand up for Jesus? Make yourself deeply uncomfortable in that moment. Put your future job, prospects, and income at risk. Friends, we've got to be prepared to face these things, because there may come a time for any of us where we have the opportunity to stand for Jesus at the detriment to our comfort in this world.

Are we prepared if that comes our way? Do you see what comes next? Jesus says, yes, I see your poverty, and yet you are rich.

Jesus, he sees the sacrifice that the Smyrnans have made to follow him. He sees their affliction. He sees their material poverty. But he says, you are rich.

[6 : 03] They might have very little in the eyes of the world, but they have spiritual blessings in Christ that the Roman world around them could not even fathom.

Same is true for us, isn't it? Can we hold on to that as we ponder the potential cost of following Jesus? The material poverty that we might face as Christians.

Friends, we are so rich in Christ. I know that this can be hard as we look around at the world around us. It is natural to ask why people who seem so utterly evil are materially quite well off.

How there are so many who have done so well in the eyes of the world by ill-gotten gains. But friends, we are so rich in Christ. Having been chosen before the foundation of the world, we've been adopted to sonship.

His grace has been lavished on us, and we have an eternal inheritance. We are rich in Christ beyond the comprehension of this world. This is good news.

[7 : 10] Let's continue in verse 9. Do you see what else Jesus knows about this church in Smyrna? He says, I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not.

Jews held a privileged position in the Roman Empire at the time. They were able to freely practice their religion. To begin with, followers of Jesus were simply thought of as Jews who happened to believe in Jesus the Messiah.

In fact, most Christians thought of themselves as exactly that. And so they shared, at least to begin with, the Jewish privileges of religious freedom. But quite quickly, things began to change.

Because the Jews insisted that these Jesus followers weren't true Jews. So the irony of our passage is that Jesus describes those Jews, those who were slandering the Christians, those who were saying that the Christians weren't really Jews.

Jesus describes those Jews as those who say they are Jews and are not. I don't know if you've ever played this trick on your siblings. I used to do it all the time growing up.

[8 : 17] It was one of my favorites. We'd have boiled eggs for breakfast. I'd finish mine. And then if you can imagine, you flip the egg over. So the cracked bit is in the egg cup. And it looks like a whole egg again.

Offer that to a hungry big brother and watch his disappointment as his spoon goes right through to reveal an empty shell. If you've not tried it, highly recommend it. Brilliant. Simple fun. In a sense, Jesus is describing the Jews as a bit like an empty shell.

They look the part. They look like Jews. They do all the right things, but they have no inward substance. In other words, they're those who claim to worship God and yet have ignored the revelation of him in Jesus Christ.

They're those who are circumcised outwardly, but whose hearts remain as cold as stone. Do you see at the end of verse 10? He calls them a synagogue of Satan.

It's pretty strong language that, isn't it? But it points, I think, to an important reality. See, though the Jews were the primary opposition to the church in Smyrna, behind their opposition, indeed, behind any opposition to Christ's church, is the work of Satan.

[9 : 26] There are many today, aren't there, who find the gospel offensive. People around us who disagree with it sharply. And it's very tempting in my experience to make those people our enemies, particularly if they target us.

But the reality is that behind their opposition is the work of Satan. In fact, human opposition to the gospel, they're not our enemies. They're our mission field.

They can and sometimes should be our friends. It's easy, isn't it, to look at maybe famous atheists or those who are particularly aggressive in their stance against Christianity, especially, I think, those who take issue with Christian ethics and, as a result, take issue with us and our stand on things. It's easy to look at those people and see enemies. It's particularly challenging when someone has hurt us personally, whether they've done that directly as a result of our faith or not.

It's so easy to look at those people and see enemies. But no human is so alienated from God that the work of Christ on the cross is not able to reconcile them to him.

[10 : 44] Our human opposition is not the enemy. It's the mission field. So let's put that together. The church in Smyrna is facing some pretty challenging times.

They've counted the material cost of their faith and they've counted the social cost too. But, Jesus says, it's about to get a whole lot worse.

Have a look halfway through verse 10 with me. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested and for 10 days you will have tribulation.

Again, notice quickly it's Satan or the devil who's behind their suffering. And the suffering brought by that battle for the church in Smyrna includes imprisonment, persecution and even death.

Indeed, we know from history that this church in Smyrna faced all of those things. It might seem utterly terrifying that the devil has the ability to cause such awful suffering.

[11 : 47] But did you see what Jesus said at the start of verse 10? We didn't read it. Go and have a look at it now at the start of verse 10. Do not fear. And he has every authority to say that.

Because though the devil inflicts the suffering, here it is Christ who is in control. Their suffering has a purpose. Did you notice that they may be tested?

And their suffering will be limited. See, it will only last for 10 days. For what it's worth, I don't think that that refers to a specific period of time.

Elsewhere in the Bible, 10 days is simply used to suggest a limited period of time. In Daniel chapter 1, 10 days is given as a good amount of time for testing. I think that's the kind of thing that's in view here.

A limited period. A good amount of time for testing. Either way, though this suffering is enacted by the devil, Christ is very much in control.

[12 : 48] He's very much in control of the suffering of the Christians in Smyrna. There is a purpose and it will not last forever. However, the same is true for us.

Make no mistake, there is a spiritual battle raging. And as followers of Christ, we are right in the middle of it. But it's important, I think, that we don't look behind the door of every trial that we face to over-spiritualize, to see the devil's attack in every detail, or ask what we are being tested for, or why we are being tested at every junction.

Because our suffering doesn't always make sense, does it? I'm very aware that there's probably people in this room, people watching, certainly, who will be suffering even now.

And it will seem like there is no purpose in it. There isn't always an obvious silver lining, is there?

And that can be so hard. I'm sure there are many of us in the room, and again watching, who can look back on our suffering, and who can see the ways that it has tested or firmed up our faith.

But I think it's also okay to look back at our suffering, certainly be grateful for what we've learned in it, and still hurt. Still wish that whatever happened to us hadn't happened.

[14 : 07] Whatever it is that we're facing, we can absolutely take Jesus' words at the start of verse 10 to heart. Do not be afraid.

We should not be afraid to suffer as Christians. You may have faced truly awful suffering. You may be facing it now. You might face it in the future.

Whenever you face it, do not fear. Because he is in control, and whatever it is that you are facing as a follower of Jesus, it has a purpose, and it will not last forever.

These verses in our passage today, they also offer us beautifully two ways that we can walk faithfully through whatever suffering it is that we face.

He says, lay hold of Jesus in verse 8, and he says, lay hold of heaven in the rest of verse 10 and 11. So let's first lay hold of Jesus. Have a look back at verse 8 with me.

[15:09] The words of him who is the first and the last, who died and came to life again. Jesus is the first and the last.

In other words, before there was anything else, he was there with the Father and the Spirit. And when everything else passes away, he will be there too. He is eternal.

He is God. He is so much more transcendent, so much bigger and beyond us than we could possibly imagine. But Jesus also died and came to life again, which means that the eternal God became man.

He lived a very human life, even to the point of death. A death that paid the price for all our wrongdoing so that we can be reconciled to him. And not only that, but three days later, he smashed the grave to pieces and now lives on the other side, which means that he lives today. Meaning that not only is Jesus so much more transcendent, so much bigger than we could possibly imagine, he is also so much more imminent, presently dwelling with us and active in our lives than we could possibly hope.

[16:23] Jesus is so much more transcendent than we could possibly imagine. He is the first and the last. And he is so much more imminent than we could possibly hope, because he died and rose again.

This was vital for the church in Smyrna. This is how they would walk through their suffering faithfully, by recognizing who their faith was in, by laying hold of Jesus.

And it is vital for us to hold these things in tension. Graham touched on this last week. If we have Jesus in view, we have to have a God who is both way bigger than us and a God who is totally present with us in mind as we think of him.

This is the Jesus in whom we put our faith. This is who we lay hold of. It's not that Jesus is a first aid kit, right? That we recognize him for who he is in our suffering and suddenly everything is okay. That's not the promise of the Christian life. We lay hold of Jesus in our relative comfort. We recognize him for who he is. And as a result, as we trust him, when we suffer and continue to lay hold of him in our suffering, we face it without fear.

[17:41] Because we have a God who has all the authority and power to give our suffering a purpose and a limited time frame. And we have a God who walks with us through our suffering.

This is the first thing that Jesus says to lay hold of in order to walk through suffering faithfully. He says, lay hold of me. Second thing that he says is to lay hold of heaven.

You see at the end of verse 10, be faithful even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown. In other words, if you make it to the end as a faithful follower of Christ, you will receive eternal life.

Throughout the Roman Empire, crowns of laurel wreaths were given to victorious athletes and victorious generals returning from battle. And we are in a battle, but it is a battle that has already been won for us by Christ on the cross.

So be faithful to him. Trust in that victory. And the victor's crown, eternal life after death, is ours.

[18:53] We've already seen that the suffering of the church in Smyrna will be for a limited time. For some, that must have meant that their faithful suffering would end in death.

In fact, there was at least one famous Christian martyrdom in Smyrna. You might have heard of him, Polycarp. He was a disciple of John, the guy who wrote this letter, and a leader of the church in Smyrna.

In fact, he was probably one of the first to read this letter. And if he was, he certainly took the words here to heart. Refusing to deny Christ, he was burned at the stake for his faith.

One account of his martyrdom claims that as he burned, he reminded his accusers that the fire beneath him would not torment him forever, but that the fire of eternal judgment that they faced would.

In other words, he was looking ahead to eternal life. He had laid hold of heaven, and as he faced suffering, even to the point of death, that is what kept him going.

[20:02] The end of verse 11 says something similar, really. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death. We are victorious by faithfulness to Christ, who won the victory for us on the cross.

And so we will not be hurt at all by the second death, which is to say we will not face that eternal fire of eternal judgment that Polycarp warned his executioners would burn forever.

That's what the second death is. That's what the second death is. To miss out on eternal life and to face an eternity of suffering. Because of who Jesus is, because he stands on the other side of death, those who follow him can be certain that they will too.

We can be certain that we will stand on the other side of death in a perfect place with perfect resurrected bodies, because that is where he is. That we will be eternally with him in a place where there is no more persecution or suffering, where every tear that those things have caused will be wiped away.

And it's this hope of an eternal life where suffering is completely done away with. It's this hope that helps us walk faithfully through suffering today, by laying hold of Christ and by laying hold of heaven.

[21 : 27] And so, someone were to walk through those doors at the back of the church and point a gun at each of us in turn. If our lives were on the line, what would we do?

Or perhaps more realistically, if our reputation was on the line, if our job was on the line, if our marriage or our family or our home or whatever it is, was on the line, what would we do?

Deny Christ? You might be sitting there thinking that this is all getting a little bit uncomfortable, a little bit too challenging. Perhaps you're a new Christian.

Or perhaps things have been particularly tough for you at the moment or recently. Maybe you believe that it's true. You have a faith in Jesus. You would call yourself a Christian.

You know you are a Christian. But if you're honest, if you're honest with yourself, you're really not sure how far you'd be prepared to suffer for this faith. You certainly wouldn't die for it.

[22 : 34] And if that's you, well, I've certainly been encouraged by this verse. In 1 Peter chapter 4, it's verse 14. 1 Peter chapter 4 verse 14 says, If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed.

For the spirit of glory and of God rests on you. In that moment where our faith is tested to such an extent, God shows up.

And he strengthens us in moments like that. Just a brilliant story to illustrate that. Corrie Ten Boom, you might have heard of her. She was a Dutch watchmaker who helped many Jews to escape from concentration camps during the war.

One evening before, the night before a great and terrifying attempt to help some escapees, Corrie was understandably, I think, getting cold feet.

To be honest, she was utterly terrified. And her father sat on the edge of her narrow bed. Corrie, he said to her gently, When you and I go to Amsterdam, when do I give you your ticket for the train?

[23 : 42] Corrie hesitated and then replied, Well, you give it to me just before we get on the train. Exactly. And our wise father in heaven knows when we're going to need things too.

Don't run out ahead of him, Corrie. When the time comes that some of us will have to die, you will look into your heart and find the strength that you need just in time. Deny Christ?

No. Because the Holy Spirit will show up and strengthen us and we will lay hold of Christ and we will lay hold of heaven and we will walk faithfully through our suffering.

Friends, remembering who he is and what he has won for us, be faithful even to the point of death. Let me pray.

Heavenly Father, thank you so much for your son, Jesus Christ. Thank you for who he is.

[24 : 45] Thank you for what he has done for us, for the prize that he has won for us in dying on the cross. Lord, I pray that we would lay hold of him, that we would lay hold of that prize and that each of us would be faithful right to the end of our lives.

Amen.