

A Letter to Smyrna: Suffering

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Preacher: Rev. Kevin Antlitz

[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. It's good to see you. It's a beautiful Sunday. If we haven't met, my name is Kevin. I'm one of the pastors here.

If we haven't met, come say hi to me after the service. I would love to connect with you. It's a real joy to be here with you this morning and to continue preaching on our Lenten series.

We're looking at the seven letters to the seven churches, which is the very beginning of Revelation. And this will be a shorter series and then we'll do a deeper dive into Revelation through sometime in July probably.

And we're going to be looking at the letter, the second letter this morning, the letter to the church in Smyrna. And in one way or another, each of these letters is about dispelling the false idea that it's possible to be a casual Christian.

The church is the bride of Christ and Jesus is the bride room who desires his bride to be passionate about following him. He desires a passionate bride, a bride who's all in, who's willing to live for him and, as we'll see, is willing to die for him.

[1 : 08] And there's really just one main theme that dominates this letter to Smyrna. It's very short, but it packs a big punch. And that theme is suffering, suffering persecution. As Tommy told us last week, the book of Revelation is aimed not so much at our head or our hearts, but at our imagination.

In one way or another, it seeks to jolt us out of a spiritual sleepiness, to wake us up from spiritual stupor. And I think the book helps us to reframe what the Christian life is all about.

It helps us to ask the question and to answer the question, what does following Jesus in this world really look like? What's required of us if we decide to follow Jesus? What does it cost to follow Christ?

I think we spend a lot of time, and rightly so, talking about how we need to think about Jesus and the world. So developing proper doctrine. And we spend a lot of time talking about what it looks like to live for Christ.

So living lives in line with the scriptures. But we probably don't spend enough time talking about the fact that to follow Jesus means that you're going to live a life that's marked by suffering.

[2 : 14] And so that's what we're going to talk about this morning. It's a pretty intense topic, but one that is important to explore. And I was thinking, you know, if this is somebody's first Sunday, you know, it could be kind of a...

Almost like I want to apologize, in a way, for talking about it. But at the same time, if you're here and you're looking to follow Jesus, you kind of need to know what you're getting into. So I thought maybe we should have a warning label if we invite people to follow Jesus that just has a big sign that says, Danger. This way leads to death.

And of course, right after that, in like bold parentheses, and through death to the resurrection, to eternal life. So that's what we're going to be talking about this morning.

And the idea of letting people know what they're signing up for reminds me of this story of a pastor. He is a Romanian pastor. And this is a story about how he would prepare youths.

I don't know how old they were for confirmation. The pastor's name is Richard Wurmbrand. Some of you may have heard of him. He's sort of like the Romanian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, if you will.

[3 : 19] He was imprisoned and he was tortured by the communist regime in Romania in the mid-20th century. He spent 14 years, many of those years, in solitary confinement. And he wasn't killed by the Romanians, fortunately.

He escaped. He was in prison several times. But he went on to write many books and to lead and equip the persecuted church. And in one book called Preparing the Underground Church, it's sort of

a manual for Christians in places where they're persecuted.

He writes this about how he prepared a group of children for, I imagine they're teenagers, he doesn't say. Maybe they're children. For confirmation. He writes this. I remember my last confirmation class before going to prison.

I took a group of 10 to 15 boys and girls on a Sunday morning, not to a church, but to the zoo. Before the cage of lions, I told them, Your forefathers in faith were thrown before such wild beasts for their faith.

Know also that you will have to suffer. You will not be thrown before lions, but you will have to do with men who would be much worse than lions. Decide here and now if you wish to pledge allegiance to Christ.

[4 : 29] And he writes that they had tears in their eyes when they said yes. Now, I'm not saying that we should do that this summer when Jane's away, take the kids to the zoo. I'm also saying we shouldn't do that. Something to think about.

But the point of this story is, the Christian life is, it's not easy and it's not for the faint of heart. And so often I think we become lax in what it means to follow Christ. It actually requires a great deal of courage in the face of fear.

And the call to be a Christian is not the call to be a hero. It's the call to be a saint, someone who's faithful unto death. And so this morning I want to look at our passage, Revelation 2, 8 through 11, to help equip us for that journey.

And so there are three things that I think this passage teaches us. First, it teaches us what we can expect in the journey of following Christ. It teaches us what we are promised to make it through that journey.

And then I want to talk a little bit about how we can prepare for this journey. So let's pray. Father, we are reminded that the call to follow you is the call to take up our cross daily and to follow you.

[5 : 29] Lord, I'm reminded of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words. When Christ calls us, he bids us come and die. I pray that you would equip us by your spirit that we would be not cowardly Christians, but that we would be faithful and courageous Christians, willing to suffer with Christ in order that we might be glorified with him.

And so I pray for our time brief, though it may be this morning, that you would speak to each one of us in the ways that we need to hear. I pray these things in Christ's name. Amen. Okay, so first, what can we expect?

So in a word, we can expect persecution. We can expect to suffer because of our allegiance to Jesus Christ. So I want to give you a little background on Smyrna, the city that this letter is written to.

Smyrna was a seaport. It's about 35 miles north of Ephesus. That's the church that Tommy talked to us about last week. So 35 miles north in a seaport on the coast of the Aegean Sea.

And Smyrna was fiercely loyal to Rome and to Caesar. The city earned the right to be the center of emperor worship in Asia Minor, which is where all of these cities are, which is in modern-day Turkey.

[6 : 41] One thing you need to know about the imperial cult, the worship of Caesar, is that the imperial cult was baked into basically every aspect of life in Rome or Roman colonies in Asia Minor.

Really, the only way to economic prosperity and to greater social standing was by participating in the worship of the Roman gods and especially of Caesar. And so if you were a Christian that found yourself in a Roman colony, you would have to make a decision.

Is Caesar Lord or is Jesus? Now the trouble is you can't really have a share in the city's public life if you're not participating in the Roman religious life.

So that is a little bit troublesome if you're a Christian trying to be salt and light in the world. And the greater trouble is you can't just really opt out without consequences. If you refuse to participate, this refusal was viewed as a threat to Roman power because you are considered an atheist and they thought that was very destabilizing.

You're viewed as disloyal and unpatriotic and you are punished by not being allowed to participate economically in the marketplace. So you would struggle financially.

[7 : 47] But you could also be imprisoned. You could be beaten. You could be exiled. And you could even be executed. This is actually the reason why Socrates was executed. If you read Plato's Apology, he was executed for being an atheist because he didn't acknowledge the same gods as the Greeks.

So it was a pretty common thing for people to be imprisoned for and to be punished for to be on the fringes of Roman society. Another thing we need to know about Smyrna is that there was a considerable Jewish colony in Smyrna.

In the early church, Jews were, it's called the Jewish Diaspora. They were spread out all over the region. And churches would plant and grow in the places where Jewish communities were.

Paul would go to those places and he would preach the gospel. And oftentimes the early Christians were Jews who decided to follow Jesus. And there was a great deal of hostility and tension and conflict for this reason.

If you decided to follow Jesus, you are perceived as a traitor to your Jewish community and your background. And so what we see in Smyrna, this is the situation on the ground, is that the Jews were slandering the Christians.

[8 : 54] And the Jews knew that they didn't have the authority to really do damage to the Christians themselves because they were under Roman rule and Roman subjugation.

Only the Romans had authority to punish and only they had the power to punish other people. And so basically what the Jewish community would do to hurt the Christians was they would basically out them to the Roman authorities and say these people are Christians and they're resisting the Roman religion and they're destabilizing Roman society.

They're a threat. And they knew if they did that, that the Christians in Smyrna would be pushed outside of the marketplace so they would suffer. They would be in poverty. And they might even be thrown into prison.

And they might even be killed. We see something similar in Acts 17 just across the Aegean Sea in Thessalonica. Paul was in the city and there was a mob of angry Jews that basically they outed Paul and the other Christians to the authorities.

And they said that the Christians were turning the world upside down. They were destabilizing the society. They were destabilizing Roman power. And the charge against them was that they were acting against the decrees of Caesar saying that there's another king, Jesus.

[10 : 15] And so if Caesar hears that there's a group of people who think there's another king, they want to wipe those people out. And this led to persecution. One thing I want to note here is in verse 2-9 there's some really strong language that John uses about the Jews.

He says the Jews are slandering Christians and he calls their community a synagogue of Satan. It's pretty intense language. The word Satan means slanderer or accuser.

And I want to note that I don't think John is being anti-Semitic here. I think that what he's doing is he's calling out the profound corruption in the first century synagogue.

We see some of that corruption in our gospel lesson where basically the Jews Jews in the first century didn't recognize Jesus for who he was and they were actually in opposition to him.

And so what John is saying is basically there are forces at work in the first century synagogue that are going against and working against God's plans and purposes in the world.

[11 : 18] One other thing that I want to highlight is that strong language like this isn't reserved just for Jews alone or it's not reserved or excluded from being applied to Jesus' own followers.

I'm reminded of the passage in the Gospels in Matthew and Mark where Peter is opposing Jesus.

Jesus is saying, I have to go to Jerusalem and I have to die. And Peter says, like, absolutely not.

You're not going to do that. And Jesus says these really strong words to Peter, his right-hand man.

He says, get behind me, Satan. Right? And the reason why he does that is because at its core, any opposition to the things of God is demonic, is satanic.

And I think this explains the otherwise just startling and surprising and bizarre move in verse 10 where John says, you know, the Jews are slandering you and the devil is going to throw you into prison.

Like, how do we get from there to here? John is identifying the real enemy. In this situation.

Revelation, so the book that we're studying is called Revelation. The Greek word is also translated as apocalypse and it literally means an unveiling.

[12 : 26] And Revelation is an unveiling. It is a revealing of God's perspective on what's going on behind the scenes in human history. And God reveals it to us because it wouldn't otherwise be available to our empirical reason.

You can't just observe what's going on and see it. God reveals it to us. So certainly the Jews and Romans are conspiring together to persecute the church. But it's all being orchestrated by the devil.

That's what John is telling us. The ultimate adversary and the opponent of God. Essentially what's happening is John is pulling back the curtain so we can see what's going on behind the scenes. And this happens to be the case with all opposition to the kingdom of God.

The real enemy and the real battle is always a spiritual one. This is what Paul writes in Ephesians 6 verse 12. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

You know, as I was thinking about the sermon, I was just reflecting on how often do I think about the cosmic powers? How often am I really paying attention to or actually thinking that there's something else going on besides what I can see and feel?

[13:35] Really not that often, if I'm honest. This reminds me of the famous line from Charles Baudelaire's short story, the greatest trick of the devil is to persuade the world that he does not exist.

Are we persuaded that he does not exist? The book of Revelation, this passage in particular, I think this morning John is trying to wake us up. He's trying to tell us that the devil is real, the devil is terrible, and the devil wants nothing more than to dismantle and destroy our faith in Jesus Christ. And if you think this is over the top, I want you to consider this image from the epistle of 1 Peter. Peter writes to the church. He uses this really powerful and terrifying image to describe the devil. He writes this in 1 Peter 5.8, Be sober-minded, be watchful. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour.

That is terrifying, right? I often, I don't think about that enough, that like everywhere I'm walking, the devil is sort of like hiding the grass, waiting to pounce on me, waiting to destroy me, waiting to disrupt my faith in Jesus in one way or another.

[14:42] And I wonder how our lives would change if we actually lived like that was true, that the devil really was prowling around trying to dismantle and destroy our faith in Jesus Christ. How would that change our prayer lives? How would that change how much we read the Bible?

How would that change how much we rely on Jesus to get us through? So what can we expect? As Christians, we can expect opposition. We can expect suffering and persecution. We shouldn't seek it.

We shouldn't seek to be martyrs. We shouldn't seek suffering. But we shouldn't be surprised when it comes. And the reality is, it's not a matter of if, but when. So the second thing, well, what are we promised?

If we can expect persecution, what can we, what are we promised? And I'm going to highlight three promises that we see in this passage that ought to encourage us to breathe courage into our hearts so that we can make it through and be faithful unto death.

The first promise that we see in this passage is that Jesus knows. Jesus says in verse nine, I know your tribulation and your poverty and your slander. Jesus knows what we're going through.

[15:43] He's aware of it. It's not a secret to him. He's not surprised by it. He is aware. And when Jesus says he knows, I don't think he's just saying that he has sort of like a cognitive awareness.

He sees what's going on. Like he's, the ascended Christ is at the right hand of the father and he's just like spectating, watching us suffer at the hand of the Jews and the Romans and ultimately of the devil.

He's not just saying like, I know that you're suffering cognitively. And I don't think he's just saying, you know, I know what it's like to suffer, where he's remembering his earthly life, dying at the hands of the Romans.

I think what he's saying is he's currently experiencing our suffering alongside with us. He personally knows he's experiencing it with us. He is in it with us. So why do I say that?

Well, I'm reminded of Acts 9 when Saul, the chief persecutor of the church, he was sort of enemy number one of the early church, overseeing the murder of the first martyr, Stephen, arresting the people who were following Jesus.

[16:47] He was on the Damascus road and he gets interrupted by the resurrected Jesus. Jesus appears to him on the road. He becomes blind and he hears this voice and it's the voice of Jesus who says, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

He doesn't say, why are you persecuting the church that I care about? He's saying, why are you persecuting me? Saul says, who are you, Lord? And Jesus says again, I am Jesus whom you are

persecuting. What this passage tells us is that Jesus is in it with us.

He so identifies with the church that when the church suffers, Christ suffers. And how is this possible? Well, Jesus is with us by his spirit. We're not alone. We're empowered by his spirit and we can't make it through.

We can't endure the suffering and the trials and the persecution unless we're relying on the spirit. Paul writes in 2 Timothy that God gave us not a spirit of fear, but a spirit of power and of love and of self-control.

And the way I interpret that this morning is power to endure suffering. If we have the spirit, we cannot endure suffering. The spirit to love those who persecute us because they're not our main enemy.

[17:51] The devil is. And a spirit of self-control to not abandon the faith. The second promise is in verse 10 and this is an encouraging one that our suffering will be temporary.

The tribulation will not last forever. Verse 10 says, do not fear. The devil is about to throw some of you in prison that you might be tested and for 10 days you will have tribulation.

Whenever you see a number in Revelation, it's symbolic. There's a whole field of theology called numerology that tries to understand all the numbers.

I wouldn't claim to know all the numbers. There's some strange and interesting theories about it in Revelation. But I think what's going on in the 10 days, it basically just means it's going to be temporary. There's an end to it.

And I think it's a clear allusion to the book of Daniel from the passage that we read this morning. As we read, the situation in Daniel is that Israel was in exile in Babylon.

[18:48] Nebuchadnezzar had conquered Israel. And basically, what the king of Babylon was doing was he called a few of the elite Israelites to come into Babylon to be indoctrinated into Babylonian culture and to Babylonian education.

And this was basically a form of soft power. Nebuchadnezzar was trying to subjugate the people of Israel and was using cultural forces rather than military forces, which is pretty effective.

And Daniel was a faithful Israelite. He was a faithful Jew. And even though he was living in exile, he wasn't going to compromise his faith. He's a great model for us. And so, he went along with the education, but he refused to go all in whenever he was asked to do something that compromised his faith.

He always remained faithful. And so, he just would refuse to eat the king's food because he didn't want to be defiled by it because the food wasn't kosher. It wasn't in accordance with the dietary restrictions.

And so, basically, he said, I'm not going to do that. And the guy who was the eunuch who was in charge of the students was a little worried because he thought if these students become malnourished and weak, he's going to get in trouble by the king.

[19:59] And so, Daniel basically says, okay, let's make a deal. Let me go vegetarian for 10 days. I'm not going to eat the king's food and wine. And if I'm, after 10 days, you'll see how I am and then you can make a decision. And what we read in the passage was after 10 days, Daniel and his crew were, they're fatter, they're happier, and they were smarter than the rest of their cohort.

After this test, they were blessed and they had favor from the Lord, right? And so, the eunuch was like, okay, fine, you guys can do whatever you want. You're doing pretty well. And so, Daniel is a model for us of taking a risk, taking risks of faith even when it costs.

But I think we need to be careful not to take the Daniel analogy too far. Unlike Daniel, Christians aren't actually promised to make it through alive. The time of testing will not be forever, which is an encouragement, but it might end in death.

This makes me think of Hebrews 11, this great, encouraging chapter of basically recounting the honor roll of faith in the Old Testament. All of the people, our mothers and fathers in the faith are spiritual forebears who had amazing exploits of faith.

As the chapter goes on, the author of Hebrews says, you know, some of our forebears in the faith stopped the mouths of lions. Some even quenched the power of fire, referring clearly to Daniel.

[21:17] But then it goes on to say, yet others didn't have quite such a nice fate. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release so that they might rise again to a better life.

Others were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated, and I love this line, of whom the world was

not worthy, wandering about in deserts and mountains and in dens and caves of the earth. You see, the call of the Christian is to trust the God and to leave the consequences to him because we know, and this is the third promise, that if we endure to the end, we have the ultimate promise, the ultimate reward awaits, which is the resurrection.

Our passage describes the resurrection as the crown of life and the conquering of the second death. Verse 210 says, be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life.

This is referring to the resurrection. And then again, it says, the one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death. What is the second death? It's the last judgment. So everyone is going to die and John is telling us that there's actually something worse than death, namely dying twice.

[22 : 27] After, when Jesus comes back, he's going to judge the living and the dead, the thing that we say when we recite the Nicene Creed. And those who are faithful to Christ will be raised to resurrected life and live with Jesus forever and those who are not will suffer the second death.

And this is why the resurrection is so important because if we don't have the resurrection, if we don't have this ultimate hope, there's no reason why we should be willing to suffer. We should hang on to our life as long as we possibly can.

So I've talked about what we can expect and what this passage promises us, how we can have great consolation in the midst of suffering. Lastly, I want to talk about how we can prepare for the test, how we can prepare for when the troubles come.

Now I know most of us, maybe you're thinking, look, we live in America, I'm probably not going to be killed for my faith. That's probably true but let's not be too, let's not get too comfortable.

You know, I was thinking about 20th century Germany. Germany was, right before World War II, was sort of the pinnacle of cultural progress at the time and things devolved really quickly.

[23 : 40] In a few years, it went from sort of the climax of European culture to Hitler taking over and the Holocaust and Christians being thrown into prison and killed as well.

So things can turn pretty quickly, I think. But right now, I think our lives, at least, are safe. And so we might not be in danger of physical death but I do think each one of us faces a kind of death in a way.

It's more social death and economic death. We might suffer public shaming or social ostracizing or damage to our careers, loss of opportunities with our jobs because of our faith.

And I think this is where our tests are and so this is what I want to talk about this morning. And the question I want to ask is, are you being faithful unto these kinds of deaths because of your faith in Jesus? And so as we close, I want to think about, I want you to think about the areas in your life where you are most tempted to hide the fact that you are a Christian.

What are the tests that you are facing? Think about those spaces. Maybe it's at work. Maybe it's with your boss or your coworkers where if they knew that you were a Christian and what that meant, that might do damage to your career.

[24 : 57] It might give you a ceiling for how you could progress in your job. Maybe it's with your family. Maybe it's with your parents or your siblings or an extended distant relative.

What would they think of you if they knew how serious you were about following Jesus? Maybe it's the parents at your kids' school. What would they think of you if they knew you went to the Church of the Advent?

What would they think of you if they knew what you believed? Maybe it's your neighborhood, wherever it is. I'm not going to name it for you. I want you to think about it. But think about those scenarios in which you're most tempted to bail on Jesus, where you're most tempted to be a closet Christian, where it would just be a lot easier if people didn't know what you actually believed.

This is probably your test. And so the question we need to ask ourselves is how can we prepare for these types of tests? How can we be faithful unto death? I want to read another passage from Richard Wormbrand's book, Preparing for the Underground Church.

And I think it's really helpful. He gives us some great advice. He's somebody who's had personal experience. He suffered a great deal and he endured the test. He was faithful. And so I think he has a lot to teach us.

[26 : 12] This is what he writes. What shall we do about these tortures? Will we be able to bear them? We must prepare for suffering and we must start now.

It is too difficult to prepare yourself for it when the communists have put you in prison. We have to make the preparation now before we are imprisoned. In prison you lose everything.

You are undressed and given a prisoner suit. No more nice furniture or nice carpets or nice curtains. You do not have a wife anymore and you do not have your children. You do not have your library and you never see a flower.

Nothing of what makes life pleasant remains. And he says this line that's haunting to me at least. Nobody resists, that is, nobody remains faithful to Christ who has not renounced the pleasures of life beforehand.

I think there's great wisdom here from this amazing Christian man who endured suffering and torture and imprisonment for Christ. And two things about this passage from his book stand out to me.

[27 : 11] First is a sense of immediacy and the second is the need to sever the attachments that we have to the world right now. And so, as we're in this season of Lent and we've talked about it before, sort of low-hanging fruit for a thing we can do immediately and a thing that we can do to sever our attachments to the world is fasting.

I know we've talked about it quite a bit, talked about it at Ash Wednesday, but I'm just going to keep pushing it because this is one of the main practices and disciplines that our tradition has handed on to us in their great wisdom.

Fasting is tailor-made, tailor-fit to this type of preparation. And it's a practice we can begin right away and it helps to free us from our dependence and our love for the things of the world.

You see, when we fast, we engage in these little acts of self-renunciation. We forego food and drink and we practice disciplining and renouncing our bodily appetites, resisting our bodily appetites. And as we practice this kind of suffering, this kind of death, we grow strong. We develop our spiritual muscles and we grow in our ability to resist a number of things.

[28 : 16] We become less attached to and less dependent on the comforts and cares of this world. One of the things that I'm fasting from this Advent, in addition to food on some days, is alcohol.

And as I've done that, I realized, wow, actually I had a, you know, like if I have a tough day at work for whatever reason, one of the things that I would be tempted to go to to bring myself comfort was to have a glass of wine or to drink a beer.

and as I fasted through the season of Advent, I realized, man, I actually had an inappropriate dependence on this thing. I was attached to these things.

I was finding my comfort and consolation in something other than God and I was exposed in fasting. And as it's been exposed, I've brought that to the Lord and it's really grown my faith quite a bit, actually.

I've become less attached to these things and I've developed, I think, a strength of character through it. So rather than being controlled by our bodily appetites and being overly dependent on things other than God, we develop a sense of mastery and control and we get a sense of confidence.

[29 : 28] And this confidence and this resistance is transformable to other areas of our lives. We develop this sense of character and self-control and confidence to resist temptation, to remain faithful unto death.

And so this season of Advent, wrapping up here, may we be a church that practices joyfully renouncing the pleasures of life now, that we might be faithful unto death whenever the troubles come and they will come and so ultimately receive the crown of life.

Let's pray.