

Victory through suffering

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[0 : 00] Our reading this morning is Psalm 2. Then he will speak to them in his wrath and terrify them in his fury, saying, As for me, I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill. I will tell of the decree. The Lord said to me, You are my son, today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You will break them with a rod of iron and dash them into pieces like a potter's vessel.

Now therefore, O kings, be wise, be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all those who take refuge in him.

And the second reading is Revelation chapters 10 and 11. Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud with a rainbow over his head, and his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire.

He had a little scroll open in his hand, and he set his right foot on the sea, and his left foot on the land, and called out with a loud voice, like a lion roaring.

When he called out, the seven thunders sounded. And when the seven thunders had sounded, I was about to write, but I heard a voice from heaven saying, Seal up what the seven thunders have said, and do not write it down.

[2 : 05] And the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven, and swore by him who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it, that there would be no more delay, but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God would be fulfilled, just as he announced to his servants the prophets.

Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me again, saying, Go, take the scroll that is open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land.

So I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll. And he said to me, Take and eat it. It will make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth it will be sweet as honey.

And I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it. It was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter.

And I was told, You must again prophesy about many peoples and nations and languages and kings. Then I was given a measuring rod like a staff, and I was told, Rise and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there.

[3 : 26] But do not measure the court outside the temple. Leave that out, for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample the holy city for forty-two months. And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for one thousand two hundred and sixty days, clothed in sackcloth.

These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. And if anyone would harm them, fire pours from their mouth and consumes their foes.

If anyone would harm them, this is how he is doomed to be killed. They have the power to shut the sky, that no rain may fall during the days of their prophesying.

And they have power over the waters to turn them into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they desired. And when they have finished their testimony, the beast that rises from the bottomless pit will make war on them and conquer them and kill them.

And their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city that symbolically is called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified. For three and a half days, some from the peoples, the tribes and languages and nations will gaze at their dead bodies and refuse to let them be placed in a tomb.

[4 : 44] And those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and make merry and exchange presents, because these two prophets have been a torment to those who dwell on the earth. But after the three and a half days, a breath of life from God entered them and they stood up on their feet and great fear fell on those who saw them.

Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, come up here. And they went up to heaven in a cloud and their enemies watched them. And at that hour there was a great earthquake and a tenth of the city fell.

Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake and the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven. The second woe has passed. Behold, the third woe is soon to come.

Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet and there were loud voices in heaven saying, The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.

And the twenty four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worship God saying, We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was.

[5 : 57] For you have taken your great power and begun to reign. The nations raged, but your wrath came and the time for the dead to be judged and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and the saints and those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth.

Then God's temple in heaven was opened and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple. There were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and heavy hail.

He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose. Now, the American missionary Jim Elliott, he penned these words in 1949.

Now, Jim, he was a brilliant scholar, a top athlete and had a great sense of humour. Yet he had his heart set on the mission field after meeting another missionary in Ecuador.

Now, Jim, he recruited four friends to reach the Orca tribe, which is a group of natives that were considered violent and dangerous. And this urge to evangelise this tribe grew over the years.

[7 : 13] And after marrying Elizabeth, his wife, he moved to Ecuador with the gospel. And you can read about it here in this book here, Shadow of the Almighty.

It's written by his wife, Elizabeth. And whenever I read about Jim Elliott's life, I cannot help but ask myself, why did he go? What gave him the courage and the conviction to go?

Now, Revelation 10 and 11, which we just read, contains some great truths that led to the likes of Jim Elliott going out into the mission field. And these chapters, they should strengthen our resolve to keep proclaiming the good news of Jesus to the whole world.

But before we dive in, let's get our bearings in Revelation. So John, he's been exiled on the island of Patmos in the first century, and he's writing to this group of seven churches who are under intense pressure to give up on Jesus.

And in chapters 10 and 11, we're in the middle of a vision given to John. And if we lean in too close to the vision and we only look at the detail, it can be rather perplexing.

[8 : 24] We need to consider the book like a Picasso painting. We need to take a step back and look at the big picture. And if we take a step back and look at the whole book, the big picture is clear.

God wins. Now, we might remember that in chapter six, we heard about the seven seals. And last week in chapters eight and nine, we heard of the trumpets.

And the seven seals and the seven trumpets are not different periods of time, but parallel accounts describing the same period. The seven trumpets are a bit like an action replay, but from a different camera angle.

And there's a little diagram of that on the outline, if you'd like to follow it, just in Vicky's email. And we left on a bit of a cliffhanger last week in chapter nine.

We heard of six trumpets of God's judgment. God's judgment of a world in rebellion, which are warnings of God's greater judgment to come.

[9 : 26] And sadly, these warnings, they're ignored by mankind and humanity refuses to repent. So we're left waiting for the final trumpet, the seventh trumpet, which signals the end of time when Jesus returns.

Now, there is a delay before the seventh trumpet, before the end of time. And now the camera angle, it shifts and it focuses on God's people. And we have a giant angel, God's messenger, who

makes a solemn oath that the end is near.

Have a look down with me at verse seven. In the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God would be fulfilled, just as he announced to his servants and prophets.

We're in extra time. The seventh trumpet is about to be blown. Jesus' return is near. And why the delay? Why doesn't Jesus come back now?

Well, because God gives his people a mission. So that's our first point. The mission. The church proclaims the gospel to all nations.

[10:40] The church proclaims the gospel to all nations. Now, if we look carefully at verse seven, a mystery must be fulfilled. Now, this mystery is the gospel.

And Paul describes this mystery, the gospel, in Ephesians three, as the plans of God to save people from all over the world. So we could reword verse seven to something like this.

But that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the gospel must be preached. Now, it's a job for all of us, the whole church.

John, at this time, was probably almost 90 years old, but he had been given a job to do. Have a look at verse 11. And I, John, was told, you must again prophesy about many peoples and nations and languages and kings.

So John must prophesy. And that simply means to preach the gospel to all people. And notice how those of the highest authority, kings, are also mentioned.

[11:52] No one is too important for the gospel. And the same is true of all Christians. The church has a job to do. And I think this helps us make sense of this rather bizarre episode of John eating a small scroll.

So the angel speaks to John and then says, verse nine. Take and eat it. It'll make your stomach bitter. But in your mouth, it will be as sweet as honey.

And I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it. It was sweet as honey in my mouth. But when I'd eaten it, my stomach was bitter.

So John, he obediently eats the little scroll. And as he did so, his mind probably turned to the prophet Ezekiel. Who was given a similar command 700 years previously.

And you can read about it in Ezekiel chapter three, where the prophet eats a scroll. And the point is this, that it is a picture of digesting and absorbing God's word.

[12:55] In other words, it means taking God's word to heart and applying it to our lives. John tastes the sweet scroll immediately. The gospel tastes wonderful.

Sweet. It is the good, good news of rescue from sin and a right relationship with God. But telling the gospel to others is not so easy.

When we tell others the good news about Jesus, we're bound to be rejected. It will taste bitter as our friends and family reject Jesus. When I was at university in Durham, I had a friend say to me in the pub, Tim, never talk to me about Jesus again.

If you do, our friendship is over. Now, the gospel, it will divide people. Now, I personally, I love Marmite. You can't beat it with a bit of melted butter and granary bread.

Some people hate the stuff. They can't even stand to be in the same room with it, is it? And so it is with the gospel. It will be sweet to some and sour to others.

[14:04] Now, Jim Elliott, he knew the truth of verse 11 deeply. He knew that his job was to proclaim the gospel to all nations, including the indigenous tribes of Ecuador.

Have a look down with me at verse 11 again. You must again prophesy about many peoples and nations and languages and kings. Now, what about the application for us?

Well, the message of chapter 10 for tired preachers, Christian parents, teenagers and believers in the workplace is to keep proclaiming the gospel. Keep going.

Keep your confidence in the word of God. We will experience the bitter aftertaste of rejection by others. But don't water down the message. Don't compromise. Keep going.

The Lord longs all of us, young and old, to leave our comfort zones, to preach the word at all times to everybody, even to kings.

[15:03] Now, next, God tells us what the reaction will be to us proclaiming the gospel to all nations. So, secondly, the reaction. The church is persecuted for proclaiming the gospel.

The church is persecuted for proclaiming the gospel. Now, chapter 10 has already hinted that some people's reaction will be bitter.

And here we're given a sobering reality check. And we're told of two witnesses in verse 3. And they seem to be able to breathe fire in verse 5.

And at this point, it's worth remembering that we're not to read this literally. And I think verse 4 helps us work out who these witnesses are. Let's have a look at that now.

These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. Now, here, the two witnesses are described as two olive trees or two lampstands.

[16:03] And we might remember from Revelation chapter 1 that the seven churches are described as seven lampstands. These two witnesses are the whole people of God.

Now, why two? Well, probably because in Jewish law, two witnesses were needed to prove truth. So the whole church is called to speak God's word. Have a look at verse 3.

And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, the whole church, and they will prophesy for 1260 days clothed in sackcloth. So they're called to prophesy.

And that means to tell the nations about Jesus. And the gospel would be proclaimed with great power. Have a look at verse 6. They have the power to shut the sky that no rain may fall during the days of their prophesy.

And they have the power over the waters to turn them into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they desire. Now, this imagery brings to mind two great Old Testament prophets.

[17:12] Elijah and Moses. Now, Elijah had the authority to shut the heavens to cause a drought. And Moses had the power to turn the Nile waters into blood.

And the point is that today we are engaged in a powerful word ministry, just as powerful as that of Moses and Elijah. Therefore, we are to proclaim the gospel powerfully.

But we will be persecuted. Let's just read verses 7 to 10, chapter 11. And when they have finished their testimony, the beast that rises from the bottomless pit will make war on them and conquer them and kill them.

And their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city that symbolically is called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified. For three and a half days, some from the peoples and tribes and languages and nations will gaze at their dead bodies and refuse to let them be placed in a tomb.

And those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and make merry and exchange presents, because these two prophets have been a torment to those who dwell on the earth.

[18:26] Now, we must remember here that the language here is symbolic, not literal. The two witnesses, the church, come under a brutal attack from the beast who represents Satan's power on this earth.

And the outcome is swift, martyrdom. Some of the church will be persecuted and even killed. And we should be in no doubt that many will want us dead.

Verse 8. And their dead bodies will lie on the street of the great city that symbolically is called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified. And here the great city is a collage of images of those who persecute God's people.

Sodom is to represent gross immorality. Egypt is to represent intense persecution. Jerusalem represents all those who cried out for Jesus' execution.

And those of us who are familiar with Jim Elliott's story will know that he experienced, verse 7, death. In 1956, Jim and four other missionaries landed in Ecuador.

[19:36] And after their second meeting with the tribe, they failed to radio in. Now, a rescue party was sent. We found only their dead bodies. All five were martyred for Jesus' sake.

And this issue is not confined to Ecuador. Today, Christians in Nigeria are being persecuted and driven out by Boko Haram. Or being tortured, imprisoned and even killed in North Korea.

God's people are persecuted all over the world. And the world will gloat over their dead bodies, verse 10. And those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and make merry and exchange presents, because those two prophets have been a torment to those who dwell on the earth.

And this shouldn't be a great surprise as some people who hear about Jesus hate being told that they're a rebel who needs forgiveness from God. They want their revenge. But it won't last long.

Verse 11. But after the three and a half days, a breath of life from God entered them. And they stood up on their feet.

[20 : 47] And great fear fell on those who saw them. Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, Come up here. And they went up to heaven in a cloud. And their enemies watched them. Now, three and a half days here illustrates that the persecution will be for a limited time only.

Under God's sovereignty. The persecution will end. And the big picture is clear. Even if God's people are persecuted, even if God's people are killed, they are absolutely secure.

They will be raised to life again. They may die on this earth, but they cannot lose eternal life. Jim Elliot was martyred at the age of 28.

But he's safe with Jesus now. And whilst this is a sobering message, we shouldn't be overly pessimistic. We heard in Revelation chapter 7 that all believers have been sealed.

All Christians have God's mark of ownership and protection. The Holy Spirit. None will be lost. We may be persecuted and even killed.

[21 : 56] But our eternal future is secure. And what a reassurance for believers in North Korea and Nigeria. And there are also hidden treasures in verse 13.

That should be a great encouragement to us. Have a look down with me. Verse 13. And at that hour, there was a great earthquake. And a tenth of the city fell.

Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake. And the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven. Now, it looks like a declaration of judgment from God.

At the world's persecution of the church. Seven thousand people are killed. Yet, remarkably, the whole rest of the city are terrified.

And they give glory to God. They rightfully fear God and worship him as their saviour. They become Christians. And it is in dramatic contrast to what happened in chapter 9.

[22 : 57] Even after the warnings of six trumpets of judgment, the people refused to repent. The warnings of the trumpets doesn't lead people to repent. But the witness of a faithful and persecuted church will lead some people to repent.

Now, this is a wonderful reminder that God's plan is for the persecuted church to be his messengers on earth. Now, Jim Elliot, he may have died at the age of 28.

But the gospel continued to go out in Ecuador. Only two years after his death, his wife, Elizabeth, returned to teach the Orca Indians the gospel. And as a result of the faithful witness of Elizabeth and others, Now, the large majority of the Orca tribe are Christians.

So, how should this encourage churches that are suffering? Like the church in Smyrna in Revelation chapter 2. Well, they need to know that being rejected is part of God's plan.

We follow in Jesus' footsteps of rejection, suffering and perhaps even execution. Now, for us, we are unlikely to be killed for telling people about Jesus.

[24 : 13] However, we may well be hauled in front of the HR department and told that evangelism against the diversity policy of the company. We may be passed over for promotion.

We may be marginalised by colleagues. We will suffer when we tell others about Jesus. But our eternal destiny is secure.

Like the two witnesses, we will be raised to life again. We already have God's seal on our foreheads. We cannot lose eternal life.

Now, from verse 15 of chapter 11, we get a glimpse into the future when the final trumpet is blown to signal the end of time, the end of the world.

So, thirdly and finally, the end. God triumphs over all nations. God triumphs over all nations. So, God's kingdom has arrived.

[25 : 12] And this is what we pray for every time we pray the Lord's Prayer. Your kingdom come. We are praying for verse 15. And the seventh angel blew his trumpet and there was a loud voices in heaven saying, The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.

And I wonder if you noticed the past tense has become. And the past tense is used here to emphasise how certain the coming of God's kingdom will be.

And it's also important to note that this passage is not saying that God was previously not king. We saw in chapter 4 that the glorious God already sits on his throne.

Instead, only at the end of time will it become obvious to all people that God reigns. And all of God's people here, represented by those 24 elders, they will worship God.

Verse 16. And the 24 elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshipped God. At the end of time, we will be split into two groups.

[26 : 32] It will be a great, great day for some. Verse 18. Second half, verse 18. And for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great.

There will be great rewards. Jim Elliott will be welcomed by God himself. Jim, I know of your sacrifice, travelling to the end of the world for my sake.

Well done, my good and faithful servant. There will be rewards for Christian parents who have laboured for years, speaking about Jesus to their children. The office workers have stood up for Jesus at every opportunity and have been ridiculed for doing so.

For teenagers and students who have become an outcast for putting Jesus above their popularity. There will be a huge welcome for all those who followed Jesus and suffered for it.

But it will be a terrible day for all those who have rejected Jesus. Verse 18, the first half. The nations raged, but your wrath came and the time for the dead to be judged.

[27 : 44] These people will face the full force of God's wrath and there will be no hiding. They will be faced with the terrifying prospect of facing God's anger for their sin and rebellion against God.

And some of us here may have noticed the parallels here with Psalm 2, our first reading this morning. And I think it's worth turning there. So could you just flip back to Psalm 2?

We'll just have a quick look at it in the Old Testament. So Psalm 2, we'll just start at verse 1.

Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? And then we'll just skip to look at the end.

Let's have a look at verse 10.

Now, therefore, O kings, be wise, be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling.

[28 : 39] Kiss the son, lest he be angry and you perish in the way. For his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed all who take refuge in him. Now, Psalm 2, it warns people to turn to Jesus.

That's what kiss the son means before they perish at the final judgment. And some of us this morning, we might not have yet put our trust in Jesus.

Well, don't delay. Now is the time to repent before you perish. We're already in extra time. The seventh trumpet is coming. The end is near. Take refuge in Jesus.

Now, for the rest of us, we should be encouraged to keep going. God's plan is to use us as messengers. We are to carry the good news of Jesus to the whole world, whether it be the Ecuadorian jungle, the mums in Dulwich Park, colleagues in Canary Wharf, or our friends at school. We will be persecuted for following Jesus wholeheartedly. Don't worry. This is normal. We follow in Jesus' footsteps of suffering and persecution.

[29 : 47] Don't worry. We are safe. All Christians have been sealed. Even if we are killed, we are safe. Our eternal destiny is secure.

We already have Jesus' seal on our foreheads. When Jesus returns, everything will be put right. There will be great rewards for some and terrible judgment for others when God triumphs over all nations.

Let me pray as we close. Heavenly Father, thank you so much for your word. Thank you that it shows us what to expect, that as the gospel goes out to all nations through the church, that we will be persecuted.

Father, we pray as a church that we would be willing to suffer for Jesus' sake. Pray that we would have the end in mind, that the victory has been won, that God will return to reign, and that we are safe and secure in Jesus.

Please help us to take this on board and pray that we'd live lives worthy of the gospel. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.