

Remain Faithful Even Unto Death

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- [0:00] The question on suffering is still there, but it changes to, where is God when we suffer? Because often when we suffer, we can't feel His presence, can we? A couple of years ago when I had a mild symptom of depression, that was the question that often occurred. Most often occurred, where are you God? Because I can't feel your presence. Now this letter to the church in Smyrna answers that question. Not directly, but we need to work it out. The Christians there were suffering, not because of depression, but because of persecution. And this letter opens the door of heaven and lets the Christians see where God, or rather Christ, is. And what He's doing when His people suffer for Him. And so, verse 8. To the angel of the church in Smyrna, write, These are the words of Him who is the first and the last, who died and came to life again.
- [1:25] I know your afflictions and your poverty, yet you are rich. I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. So perhaps a bit of historical context to help us understand this. A prominent facet of the society during that time was the imperial cult. So, citizens, the Roman citizens of both upper and lower classes, were required by law to sacrifice to the emperor and worship him as if he was a god. Now, the Jews, the Jewish people, were exempt. Exempt from having to worship the Roman gods or the Roman emperors because their religion was officially recognized. So, they were allowed to worship only one god, Yahweh. Now, during the first few decades after it was born, Christianity was often thought of as a sect of Judaism.
- [2:37] And therefore, Christians were somewhat protected. They were allowed not to worship the emperor or the Roman gods. But then, many Jews did not like this. Not all of them, but many of them did not like this. So, what the Jews, some of them did, was that they often slandered the Christians. So, from the book of Acts and the writings of the church fathers, we know that many times the Jews, some of the Jews, incited and encouraged Gentiles to oppress Christians. This was probably the cause of the affliction that the church in Smyrna faced. And Christians during that time were also poor. Well, historically, the early Christians mostly came from the poorer, from the lower classes to begin with. And they gave away their possessions to other people liberally.
- [3:43] But also, historians believe that some Jews possibly also persuaded both Jews and pagans to exclude the Christians from economic activities, from buying and selling, or to cause them to lose their jobs, or perhaps even to destroy their properties. And that's why the Jews in this passage were being referred to as a synagogue of Satan, because they were against the Christians.

Now, imagine having to face all that. Being a Christian in the first century was very hard. So, we might ask, where is Jesus when his people suffer all this affliction, all this slander and exclusion?

What is he doing? And what does Jesus say? Well, Jesus shows them that, first of all, he shows them that he is sovereignly above them, reigning as a king.

And so, in verse 8, he is called the first and the last, which means he is above time. Everything begins and ends with Jesus.

[5 : 18] And because he is above time, he knows everything that happens in time. And so, in verse 9, he says, I know your afflictions and your poverty.

I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not. And in verse 10, Jesus even knows what's going to happen in the future.

The Christians will suffer, and they will be imprisoned. Jesus knows. Nothing surprises him.

When people ask, where is God in suffering? Perhaps one of the implications is, surely God doesn't want suffering for me, and if I suffer, does that mean that he has lost control?

Well, here, Jesus shows that he is still in control, because he knows what is going on and what will come.

[6 : 28] In fact, the reference of 10 days in verse 10 is important. In verse 10, do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer in the future.

I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for 10 days. Well, 10 days there have two layers of meaning.

The first layer, it shows the sovereignty of Jesus, who appoints how long they're going to suffer. 10 days, no shorter, no longer, it doesn't last forever.

Jesus has sovereignly appointed their suffering. You're going to suffer for 10 days. He has not lost control. And second layer, the 10 days there, is a symbolism taken from our first passage in Daniel, where Daniel said to the guards, to the guard, test us for 10 days, because they refused to eat the king's food, because the food is sacrificed to idols.

So, they are tested for 10 days, to see whether they can be as strong, and as intelligent, as the others, only from eating vegetables, and drinking water.

[8 : 04] After 10 days, they emerge 10 times better, than the king's magicians, and enchanters. And so here, in this text, in Revelation, the author, John, is highlighting a parallel, or, or Jesus, because he's saying it.

He's highlighting a parallel. Christians in Smyrna, are persecuted, because they refuse to bow down, to the king, and to the gods. So they are put to suffering, for 10 days, as a test, to see, that God, can truly provide, and do miracles, for them, even when they refuse, to participate, in the world's idolatry.

And so, where is Jesus, when his people suffer? He is, above them, ruling, over history, knowing, every single thing, even decreeing, things to pass, and he will have, victory, at the end.

In fact, his prediction, in verse 10, came true. We know, from history, about, Saint Polycarp.

So, Saint Polycarp, was the bishop, of Smyrna, this church, that we're talking about here. He was the bishop, and he was, a disciple, of John. And he was caught, and killed, in, around, 150 AD, about 50, years, after this letter, was written.

[9 : 49] Now, Polycarp, probably, would have been, one of the people, reading this letter, because he was, the bishop of Smyrna. And a few decades, later, he was caught, because he refused, to burn incense, to the Roman emperor.

And, it was, the Jews, who defamed, and reported him. And then, he was burned alive. And, when the fire, failed to, kill him, he was stabbed, to death.

The Jews, even helped, gather wood, to burn Polycarp, on a Sabbath. But, Polycarp, knew, where Jesus was.

Before he was burned, on the stake, he said, 86 years, I have served him. He has done me, no wrong.

How then, can I blaspheme, my king, and my savior? Polycarp knew, that Jesus, where Jesus was, he was his king, sitting above him.

[10:57] he was above him, reigning, in sovereignty. And, second, Jesus shows them, that he is not only, above them, but also, right next to them.

in verse 9, Jesus says, I know, your afflictions, and your poverty. Well, we have said, that Jesus knows, everything, because he, is sovereign, over all.

But, we have to be careful here, not to read, this verse, only as an expression, of God's, all-knowing nature. Here, Jesus, is not just, saying, that he knows, everything.

He is, specifically, saying, to the Christians, in Smyrna, I know, your afflictions, and your poverty. This is, personal knowledge.

I see you. I know, what you're, going through. And, not just, personal knowledge, this is an expression, of sympathy.

[12:07] Because, look at what he says, right before that, in verse 8. These are, the words, of him, who is the first, and the last, who died, and came to life again.

I know, your afflictions, and your poverty. In other words, Jesus, has been there. Jesus, has endured, suffering, and has died.

He knows, he truly knows, what it feels like. And, then, he repeats again, I know, about the slander, of those, who say they are Jews, but are not.

Again, this is Jesus, sympathizing. He has been there, before. He has endured, slander. The Jews, opposed him, before they opposed, the Christians.

He knows, what it's like. Here, in this one verse, Jesus is saying, that, he knows, he knows us, he knows, he knows, our specific, afflictions, he knows, what it's like, to be afflicted, he knows, the slander, that we're facing, for his name, and he knows, what it's like, to be, slandered.

[13:22] What kind of God, other than Jesus, can truly say this? That, he knows, personally, and what it's like, to be in our place.

So, where was Jesus, when this Christian suffered? Right next to them, saying, I know, I see you, I've been there too, I too, prayed, that this cup of suffering, might pass from me.

But as I faced suffering, and came out, on the other side, as a victor, so will you. He has been there before, and we are called, to follow him, following the pattern, of his death, and resurrection.

And so, this is linked, to the third point. Jesus shows, the suffering Christians, that he is, in them, and they are, in him, because they are, participating, in his suffering, and he will give them, his resurrected life.

In this passage, the suffering of Christians, follows, the pattern, of the suffering, of Jesus. Later, in Revelation, chapter 5, when John, hears about, the triumphant, the triumphant, lion of Judah, he turns around, and sees, a lamb, that has been slain.

[15:04] The way of, victory, and resurrection, in the kingdom of Jesus, is, U-shaped. It's taken, through the path, of suffering, and then death, and then, victory.

That is, the pattern, that Christians, are called, to follow, or to participate in. And so, at the end of verse 10, Jesus says, that if the Christians, endure, this suffering, to the point of death, they will win.

They will be given, a crown, of life. U-shaped, pattern. The crown imagery, there, comes from, sports.

So, in Smyrna, back then, there was, a stadium, the ruins of, which, are still, here, are still there, today.

So, there was a stadium, where, sporting events, like, races, were, were often conducted. And the winners, were, usually, crowned, with, wreaths.

[16:19] Crown, um, now, racing, racing is hard. They have to, endure, fatigue, and muscle pains, and what not.

And probably, um, in a marathon, they, had to, fight, the temptation, to stop. But, when, if they endured, and they win, they're given, a crown.

And so, just like that, the Christians here, are called to, endure, to endure, suffering, and even death, and Christ, will give them, the crown, of life, eternal.

And so, in verse 11, it says, he says, the one who is victorious, will not be hurt, at all, by the second death, that is, the eternal death, in hell, after physical death.

If we endure, even if we die, we will win, and we will get, the crown, of eternal, life, the U-shaped, victory, of Christ.

[17:33] As Paul, also says, in Philippians 3, I want to know Christ, yes, to know the power, of his resurrection, and participation, in his sufferings, becoming like him, in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection, from the dead, the U-shaped, pattern.

And so, when we suffer, for Christ, he is, in us, and we are, in him, because we, participate, in the pattern, of his suffering, and we will, participate, in his, victory, over death, and we will, have the crown, of eternal life.

And that's why, Jesus says, in verse 8, that these Christians, are rich, even though, they are materially, poor.

If they participate, in the suffering, of Jesus, they also participate, in the wealth, of the kingdom, of Jesus. In Matthew 5, Jesus says, blessed, are the poor, in spirit, for theirs, is the kingdom, of heaven.

They own it. And again, blessed are those, who are persecuted, because of righteousness, for theirs, is the kingdom, of heaven.

[19:01] On earth, these Christians, might be excluded, from buying, and selling. They might be poor. Their possessions, might be destroyed. But when heaven, is opened, the kingdom, of heaven, has their names, on it.

In Jesus, they own, a kingdom. And they will, receive it, if they endure. in 2004, American pastor, Joel Osteen, released a best, a New York Times, best selling book, called, Your Best Life, Now.

I will probably, change that title, a little bit. Because in the Bible, there is no such thing, as having our best life, now. If we say, that our best life, is now, then we still haven't, seen the greatness, and the glory, of the kingdom of God, that is waiting, for us later.

That's our best life. If we say, that our best life, is now, then we insult, those Christians, who suffer, for the sake of Christ, in this world, right now.

As they are waiting, for the crown of life, which comes later. And that is, our best life. Perhaps, three short points, of application, will suffice.

[20 : 45] First, we know, that some parts, of the universal church, are more, severely persecuted, than others. And so, as we read, this passage, in 2023, in Australia, in Doncaster, we might think, yeah, great, amen.

But this passage, doesn't really apply to us. At least, not yet. So, let's just be thankful, thankful for now, that we don't have, to face this. Well, yes, that's true.

We need, to be thankful, that we need, we don't have, to face this, right now. But I'd like, to challenge you. Have we been, so individualized, that we don't feel, the suffering, and pain, of other members, of the body, of Christ, anymore?

That when we read, something like, this passage, that is not, or not yet, relevant, to our current situation, we just close it over, or we, find it hard, to apply.

Because we don't think, about other members, of the body of Christ. This is also, a confession. Because recently, I found, that, I read, about what's been happening, with persecuted churches, only, when I need, to write prayers, for church.

[22 : 13] But doesn't, Paul say, that when, one member, of the body, of Christ, is in pain, the whole body, feels it?

Do we feel it? Is that true? Instead of, closing over, this passage, do we say, hey, there are others, who suffer? How can we say, with John, in chapter 1, that we are, brothers, and companions, in the same suffering?

So, that's the first application. Do we lament, along with them? Do we pray, for them?

Do we, give, to help them? Do we send, missionaries? Do we send, ourselves, to help them? Or, at least, we say, to God, if you want, to send us, if you want, send me, Lord, send me.

Do we care, at all? Second application, is, to hang on.

[23 : 33] Hang on, to this truth. This passage, shows the heavenly, spiritual reality, behind the, difficult life, here on earth, as Christians.

The Bible, insists, that when we suffer, Christ, is above us, reigning over history, next to us, sympathizing with us, and in us, as we participate, in his suffering.

That is, what we need, to hang on to. We are, currently, not as persecuted, as this church, in Smyrna. But, there is, always, a possibility, of future, persecution.

Jesus, Jesus has, warned us. And, when we suffer, we need to, hang on, to this, spiritual truth, that Christ, is, right here.

Even, when, everything, feels, dark, and lonely. Because, when we suffer, we won't, feel it. Christ, is right here, but we won't, feel it.

[24 : 45] And so, the book of Revelation, helps us, by opening, the door of heaven, and lets us, take a peek, and to see, that Jesus, is right here. Even, when we don't, feel it.

Third, application. If Christ, is above us, next to us, and in us, as we suffer, then, we can, pour out, our hearts, to him.

we can pray, like those, persecuted Christians, in Revelation 6, how long, how long, sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you, have judged, the inhabitants, of the earth, and avenged, our blood, or avenged, our brothers, and sisters blood.

Or, we might sing, like the psalmists, how long, will my enemies, will our enemies, triumph, over us?

We can ask, these questions, with full assurance, that Jesus, is listening, because he is, right next, to us, caring, and understanding.

[26 : 04] I'm going to end, with, by reading, my wife's, devotional material, from this morning. You know the song, Jesus loves me, this I know.

Yes. Now this devotion, talks about, the last stanza, of that song. I'm going to read it to you. Jesus loves me, he will stay, close beside me, all the way.

Then his little child, that is us, will take, up to heaven, for his dear sake. This last stanza, comforts, the anxious, fearful child, in all of us.

Jesus will not, abandon us, when things get hard. We don't need to panic, although we can, certainly, cling. He will stay, beside us, all the way.

All the way to where, you might ask? All the way, to the grave. And while, that may seem, like a bleak way, to end a song, isn't it, a deep, isn't it deeply, comforting?

[27 : 16] Just for us, to know, that the scariest, place, we can imagine, going, will not be a place, without Jesus, loving presence. Even if, and when, we breathe, our last breath, whether in childhood, or old age, he will never, leave us, nor forsake us.

He will stay, until we exhale, and he will be, our sight, on the other side. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, thank you for, faithfully, staying with us, especially, when we face, hardships, for your sake.

Help us, to stay faithful, to you, until one day, when we see, your face. Amen.