

Smyrna: Faithful to the End

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[0 : 00] About 50 years after Jesus used John to write the book of Revelation, a man named Polycarp, who was one of John's students and disciples, and an important figure in the early church, was executed for his faith.

Now, the execution of Christians, as you are well aware probably, was not rare in the early days of the church. But it was still after a series of murders in which some believers were taken into an arena and literally fed to wild animals that the bloodthirsty crowd began to cry out for the blood of Polycarp.

He was 86 years old at the time, and the official charge against him was atheism. Now, don't let that confuse you.

It wasn't that he didn't believe that there was a God. But in the Roman context, anyone who would have rejected the plurality of gods that they worshipped were considered atheists.

It wasn't so much that he didn't believe in a God. It was his position on the exclusivity of Christ and the Christian God that was so offensive to them so that they considered it to be a violation of their law.

[1 : 21] That was the charge levied against him, and that's what ultimately led to his execution. There was an early pamphlet among the early church written by a man named Irenaeus.

Irenaeus was a student of Polycarp. Irenaeus, we have many of his writings, but one of them was called the Martyrdom of Polycarp, where he recorded the details of how this unfolded in his teacher's life.

Martyrdom was becoming so routine among Christians in those days that the booklet Irenaeus wrote began to be circulated as a means of encouraging and teaching Christians on how to suffer well for the sake of Christ.

With extraordinary resolve, Polycarp was brought into an arena as a crowd roared for his murder. As an influential Christian in the region, the Roman proconsul was determined to get Polycarp to publicly recant. He thought if he could get him to turn away and publicly recant against these anti-Caesar beliefs that he was teaching and encouraging other people to believe, that it would begin to diminish the effectiveness of the Christian gospel in the region.

And one of the things that the proconsul wanted for Polycarp to do in this attempt to convince him to recant is he said for him to swear by the genius of Caesar, in other words, to claim Caesar as Lord is what he wanted him to do.

[3 : 04] And then he said to repent and say, away with the atheists. And of course, Polycarp's response to that was to motion toward the crowd that had gathered and was calling for his murder and to indeed say, away with the atheists.

That's quite the resolve in that particular moment. It's said that the proconsul, sensitive to Polycarp's age even and his weakness as an 86-year-old man, was somewhat reluctant to go through with the execution.

And he even encouraged Polycarp to make this turn, even if he didn't believe it truly in his heart, if he would just make this public confession so that he could be released and he wouldn't have to go through this execution.

And it's to that that Polycarp responded with the famous words that I'm sure you've heard before. 86 years I have served Christ and he never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my king who saved me?

And after that, a pyre was erected. Polycarp was put to death and burned at the stake. Polycarp was the pastor of the church in Smyrna, which is the congregation to which Jesus delivers this message and to whom it was first intended.

[4 : 30] Let's briefly consider the sermon's place here in this chiastic structure. I did remember to put it on the screen this week. Remember, as we're following this literary structure that John, under Jesus' direction, is using here, that the mirror church of Smyrna is the church of Philadelphia.

Now, these two churches are related to one another in the sense that neither of the churches receive a complaint, correction, or a call to repentance from Jesus. Of the seven churches, two of them are healthy.

Two of them have no complaint from the Lord. Two of them are not called to repentance, and it's Smyrna and Philadelphia. If you read through them, you'll also find that they share a familiar opponent.

Both congregations are being harassed by a group of Jews that Jesus refers to as the synagogue of Satan. In both letters or in both sermons, that's the terminology that he uses.

And what we discover is that under intense pressure from the culture in which they lived, these two churches shine as a glowing example of perseverance in faithfulness to Jesus and to the gospel and to what it means to live a life worthy of the gospel.

[5 : 55] They become our example in a culture that may not be threatening us with the same form of persecution, but is in just as much of opposition against us.

And what will we do? That's the question that we come to here in this passage. Now, the content of Jesus' sermon to Smyrna is hugely significant on at least two levels.

First, it helps us to develop a proper theology of suffering. It helps us to think about the reality of suffering for the Christian and God's role in that suffering.

There's no room for the heresies of prosperity gospel and the word of faith movement in this message. They don't know what to do with passages like this except to ignore them and to reject them.

This sermon reminds us that Christians should expect some measure of suffering for the name of Christ and we must recognize God's sovereignty in that suffering.

[7 : 00] It reflects this cosmic war that begins to unfold in chapter four of the book of Revelation or just after chapters four and five where those who follow Christ will in this life always suffer at the hands of those who do not follow Christ.

And what we see in this sermon to Smyrna is an early instruction from Jesus about what we will see continue to unfold in the book. Second, this sermon shows us that the only way possible to deal with the inevitable tribulation is to wholeheartedly believe the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ.

The only proper response, the only proper and true hope is to consider the gospel of Jesus. How could Polycarp and thousands of other Christians through the centuries face persecution with such boldness and assurance?

How is that even possible to do that? If you're like me, you can't imagine being in a situation like that. And if you understand your own weakness, you probably don't think that you would respond in the same way as Polycarp and many others have done.

How can they possibly do that? It's not because they're built different than us. It's not what it is. It's because they persevered in the amazing hope that can only be found in the person and work of Jesus.

[8 : 41] You can persevere through Christ, but you will inevitably fall without Him. So as we go through this sermon and as we get to it here, we want to consider those two things.

How is it that we are to develop a theology of suffering as Christians? What does that mean for us according to this passage? And when we face it, what do we do?

How do we respond? Okay. First thing I want you to see is the church identity in Christ's title. Again, we're going to be using these same points as we work through each sermon. But look with me at verse 8 as we think about these two things.

To the angel of the church in Smyrna write, the words of the first and the last who died and came to life. The most notable thing about the ancient city of Smyrna for us this morning is its intense loyalty to Rome.

From about 200 BC, Smyrna was committed to Rome even when its imperial success was not a guarantee. Even at the height of Rome's fight and struggle against Carthage, Smyrna historically was very much loyal to Rome.

[10 : 00] Cicero, as you will probably at least recognize the name from your history books, said that Smyrna was one of Rome's most faithful and ancient allies.

And loyalty was eventually rewarded to them by Tiberius, who we see in the New Testament Gospels, as he chose Smyrna to be the city and the guardian of a new temple in honor of Caesar Augustus.

So this was a significant city in the context of Rome. They were very loyal. To be Smyrna was to be a Roman. They were proud of that.

They loved Rome, and Rome loved them. And it's this devotion to Rome that explains why the citizens of the city were so hostile to Christianity.

Because Christianity represented a threat against what they were so loyal to in the imperial cult of Rome. And it also sets the tone for Jesus' call for these believers to be more faithful to him than even their local and national heritage.

[11:12] That's an important implication here. While Christ desires that Christians be the best possible citizens, our loyalty and our love for country must pale in comparison to our faithful devotion to our Lord and Savior.

When it comes to it, if it comes to it, for you to decide whether you'll be a faithful American or a faithful Christian, if those two things are ever set in opposition to one another, Lord willing, you'll choose to be a faithful Christian.

That's what was happening in Smyrna. And that's what these Christians there were up against. And we need to keep this in mind as we move forward through this particular sermon. Now let's think about the Christ titles for just a minute.

There's two of them here. And before I mention them, just remember, this is not John's estimation of who Jesus is. This is Jesus's self-revelation.

He tells us who he is so that our faith is grounded in his words, not just in what John thought about him. That's important to remember. And how Jesus describes himself to Smyrna emphasizes that he is both God and Savior, sovereign over all things, including life and death.

[12:34] That's the significance of the titles. That Jesus is the first and the last, that's what he says in verse 8, that he is the first and the last is a clear allusion to the Old Testament descriptions belonging only to Yahweh, to God.

God describes himself this way many times through the prophet Isaiah. Let me just read two of them to you. Isaiah 44, 6, Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts, I am the first and I am the last.

Besides me, there is no God. He says later in Isaiah 48, Listen to me, O Jacob and Israel, whom I called. I am he. I am the first and I am the last.

My hand laid the foundation of the earth. My right hand spread out the heavens. When I call to them, they stand forth together. What's Jesus doing here?

Jesus is identifying himself with God the Father, an explicit claim of divinity and oneness with the Father.

[13:43] And the significance of this title for the people in Smyrna is that Jesus is fully aware of and sovereign over their tribulation and the persecution and suffering that they are indeed facing.

And the same is true for us. It's true for us. Nothing that happens to us, neither the opposition we endure nor the death that we may face for his sake is outside of the sovereign control of the Lord Jesus.

He is the first and the last. He was before anything else. He will outlive everything else. He is God alone. This is a clear statement to his sovereignty over their circumstance.

That Jesus is the one who died and came to life puts his gospel front and center of Smyrna's trial. Do you see that?

He says, I am your God. I'm the sovereign one. I'm also your Savior capable of providing for you what you fear most.

[14:57] He reminds us that we identify with him in suffering because he suffered for us. And if Jesus conquered death through the resurrection, we can face the threat of death without fear knowing that he promised the crown of life to all who will be faithful unto death.

And in the end, what we find is that the sermon to the church in Smyrna isn't so much about their suffering as it is about the glory and the power of the risen Lord.

That's really what this sermon is about. Among other things, these two titles teach us that in the context of suffering, we are comforted by Christ's divine sovereignty and we have our eternal hope resting on the fact of his resurrection.

His resurrection. The resurrection is not something we are to think of on Easter weekend alone. It is our hope every day. We sing about it.

Because he lives, I can face tomorrow. Because he lives, all fear is gone. Because I know he holds the future and life is worth the living just because he lives.

[16:26] The resurrection makes all the difference when we come and we begin to develop our theology of suffering. How do we endure that? How do we face it? We face it with the gospel of Jesus front and center.

How will we persevere? Only when we fully are convinced of entrusting in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That's the significance here.

Well, let's look also at the commendation. Verse 9, I know your tribulation and your poverty but you are rich and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not but are a synagogue of Satan.

Well, the commendation here is implicit. Jesus commends them because they are persevering through this incredible hardship and what that hardship and perseverance is proving is their faithfulness to the Lord.

The Lord's knowledge of their tribulation is a statement of their commitment to the gospel. It is actually their faithfulness to the Lord that has produced their suffering and Jesus assures them that he is fully aware of it.

[17:37] He knows their struggle. I know your tribulation, he says. Tribulation here is defined by two other words. It's defined by poverty and it's defined by slander.

So just like in the sermon to the church at Ephesus, we could really appropriately render this sentence, I know your tribulation, namely, your poverty and the slander of the Jews.

But it is important to recognize that the tribulation, the suffering, the affliction that this church is facing is coming specifically as a result of their faith.

It's a specific kind of affliction. Jeffrey Weima says it this way, in this context, tribulation refers not to the kind of common suffering that can fall upon all humanity as a consequence of living in a fallen world, but it is the specific kind of suffering that stems from identifying as a Christian.

Now, we can take implications from this text and apply it to other suffering. We could take it and we could apply it to suffering with our health or suffering the things that are common to all people as a result of living in a fallen world.

[18:56] Jesus is still sovereign over those things. Our hope in those things is still the gospel and the resurrection. But what Jesus has in mind specifically here and firstly is this dynamic of suffering for the name of Christ, for being a Christian.

Contrary to what you hear conveyed in popular American Christianity especially, the Bible guarantees that faithful Christians will have to endure some measure of affliction for Christ. It's actually a guarantee. It may not be to the extent of Polycarp. It probably won't be to the extent of Polycarp. But if you are to live a faithful Christian life, you will come under some measure of affliction as a result.

Jesus says it in Matthew 10. He tells the disciples plainly, you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved, he says.

Paul writes to Timothy, indeed all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. That doesn't mean put to death.

[20:07] It just means you're going to face opposition as a Christian. And he goes on and he says this will happen while evil people and imposters will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.

But as for you, he says, continue in what you have learned. Peter says it this way in 1 Peter 4. Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you as though something strange were happening to you.

But rejoice, he says, insofar as you share Christ's sufferings that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. There are many more passages than just these.

But notice the commonality. There's a thread that's bringing all of these together. Part of the thread is that we will indeed face opposition for our faith.

If we are to live it faithfully, we will face opposition. The other part of this thread is this encouragement from the apostles, don't give up. And from Jesus, keep going, be faithful to the end.

[21 : 17] Paul says to Timothy, but you just stay steadfast, Timothy, in the things that you know to be true in the Bible. Peter, rejoice in it. Not that you're happy to suffer, but rejoice in that you are identifying with Christ.

Stay faithful, he means. Like I said, the odds of any of us facing martyrdom are really unlikely. But still, the fact is that all of us who publicly confess Christ and stand boldly on the gospel are going to face some form of persecution that will test whether or not we're serious about this faith.

The world tests us. And it should be a conviction to us if we've never really dealt with this kind of opposition. If we've never really felt with any kind of opposition against our faith, it might be because we're not really pursuing godliness at all.

there's no way for the world to actually recognize that there is a Christianity that we subscribe to because we're no different.

Paul says those who desire to live godly, well not everybody that names the name of Christ desires to live godly. You say, I haven't really ever faced opposition like this.

[22 : 38] Well that may be the case. You may not be facing any kind of opposition. It could be because you have decided to live in such isolation to the world that they never see your good works that could either glorify your Father which is in heaven or face the opposition that you face now.

It's not that you don't live godly, it's that you don't live in the world that God has left you to live in. That's a problem. It could be that you're living in the world and that you're living godly but when it comes to things like evangelism you are just unbelievably silent.

When the tough conversations come up and the spirit gives you an opportunity to step in and be a witness of the gospel you are motionless, silent.

Well how would we expect to face opposition if we're not actually living the way that Christ has called us to live? All of those things matter. But if you're going to live faithfully in the way that Christ has led us and called us to live this will happen.

It's going to happen. Let's think about the two particular ways that Jesus mentions their affliction here. First he mentions poverty. Poverty. I know your tribulation and your poverty.

[23 : 52] Now it is true that many Christians in the early church especially came from the lower social classes but what Jesus has in mind here is a poverty that has come as a result of their Christian faith.

And let's think about how this might have unfolded for them. There's several ways that we can discern this. Hebrews chapter 10 and verse 34. If you want to write that in the margin of your notes you can read it later. I don't have it in front of me but Hebrews 10 34 speaks of Christians being attacked and their property and belongings being confiscated.

Being confiscated not justly so but simply on the premise that they are Christians and they have enemies. It's intimidation. It's threat.

Christians deal with this. We deal with this kind of stuff. In that day a worker's ability to be successful in trade was tremendously hindered when the larger culture cut them out of society. Right? So in the days of Smyrna it was the Christians who were up against the calls for boycotting. Ironically it's the Christians these days that become so vindictively boycotting in the culture that they have subscribed to.

[25 : 06] But in this day it was actually the Christians who were under that threat. They couldn't belong to certain trade guilds if they didn't participate in certain cultural religious ceremonies.

Which means that they were completely cut out of the business trade. Well if you can't get anybody to come and shop at your store or if they skip right over you in the market you're not going to make any money.

And because of their faith as an extension of this persecution they have developed this poverty.

Some in the church were facing imprisonment. We find that later on in this sermon.

And of course this brought another layer of financial hardship for their families. What it boils down to is the Christians in Smyrna were faced with a dilemma.

They were either going to make a living or they were going to be faithful to Jesus. Those were their options. They were in a corner. What do we do here?

[26 : 05] Do we kind of quietly live our Christianity here on Sundays when we're at the house church but then during the week we just participate in what the culture is because how else are we going to survive?

Is that what we do? Or do we stay faithful both in private and in public even at the risk of our own wealth and well-being?

That's the dilemma that they face. But then Jesus says this interesting thing here in verse 9. While acknowledging their poverty he reminds them of an eternal perspective.

He says but you are rich. You're rich. What does he mean by that? Christian poverty and worldly riches in this life are somewhat of a facade.

It's superficial. In the end the wealth and prosperity of this world is going to perish and it's going to expose that those who rebel against the Lord are actually the ones who are truly destitute.

[27 : 09] But even though a Christian and a believer may face affliction that results in poverty in this life in the end that poverty will pass and it will reveal a kind of riches that this world cannot comprehend.

And it is Jesus' intention for the church in Smyrna and the church at Lake Norman to live in light of this understanding so that when they and we are faced with this particular dilemma will we publicly profess Christ or will we only hide it in the corner so that we can still continue to live in comfort in this life?

Jesus is later going to say give it all up. Give it all up for me. Why? Because you're rich in a way that this world does not understand. Those are hard words from our Lord.

Those are hard words. Well then he mentions their slander. There's a group of Jews Jesus mentions who are maliciously slandering these Christians.

Now when John uses the term Jew here he's using it in the sense of being the true people of God. That's the idea. he's not talking about ethnic Israel.

[28 : 24] He's talking about who are the true people of God. That's why Jesus says or excuse me not John but Jesus Jesus says that they claim to be Jews but they are not.

Now what is Jesus saying? Jesus is saying that though they are ethnically and religiously Jewish they are not the true people of God.

Why? Because they have rejected the gospel. Rejected the gospel. That's the sense in which he's using the term here. Instead he said that they belong to the synagogue of Satan.

Christ adversary. That's what the word Satan means. It means adversary and he's the ruler of this world in the book of the Revelation. Now what is this church going up against?

Well there are ethnic and religious Jews in Smyrna who are slandering them. They claim to be Jews but Jesus says they are not the true people of God. Because they have rejected me they are not my people.

[29 : 28] The church is his people. The reason these Jews were slandering Christians is actually fairly simple. Judaism was tolerated in Roman culture so long as it was not disruptive to Roman culture and life.

Christianity generally was viewed as a sect within Judaism and Christianity by its very nature is disruptive. Jesus told us in some sense to be disruptive not in a negative sense but as we evangelize the world that's going to cause some problems because people are naturally offended by the gospel message.

Christianity is naturally disruptive. Judaism is tolerated so long as it isn't disruptive and the problem for these Jews is that the Romans considered Christians to be Jews.

That was the problem. So the Jews knew their hope for survival was if they were the ones who were actually turning in the Christians. If they were the informants that were making a distinction between Judaism and Christianity then that in some sense in their minds would get them off the chopping block and they would be sacrificing the Christians instead.

But in order to do that it meant that they had to actually make up lies about the Christians and there's lots of historically documented lies that they were making. They were accused of being cannibals and they would accuse them of this because of their view of the Lord's Supper when they would come together Sunday by Sunday and they would take of the bread and the wine as it related and symbolized the body and the blood of Jesus.

[31 : 08] Well the Jews took that dynamic and that theology and they told the Romans these people are cannibals because they called each other brother and sister in this familial relationship they accused them of being incestuous.

There were accusations of treason because Jesus was their Lord more than Caesar was their Lord. As we saw in Polycarp's case they were accused of being atheists.

These are all historical charges brought against these people that we read in the documents that we have surviving historical documents from Rome describing what this was like for these Christians.

You ever had somebody tell a lie about you? You ever had somebody maliciously and intentionally misrepresent what you say and what you believe just so that you can face hardship and difficulty? This is exactly what the Jews did to Jesus. They tried to accuse him to Rome in Jerusalem based on Roman law and they maliciously slandered him which resulted in his crucifixion.

[32 : 21] It's what they did to the church in Smyrna. It's what they're going to do until the Lord returns. It's going to keep happening that way. Slander. Poverty.

The question is when we face this kind of opposition will we stay faithful? Will we stay faithful? That's what Jesus deals with next.

Let's look at the charge here. Verse 10 Do not fear what you're about to suffer. Behold the devil is about to throw some of you into prison that you may be tested.

For ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown. Well since there's no complaint for the church in Smyrna neither is there a correction or a call to repentance. So Jesus directly charges them, commands them regarding their affliction and especially how their affliction is about to escalate. He clarifies how he expects his people to respond when facing even the severest forms of persecution and the bottom line is this we must be faithful to the end.

[33 : 35] Faithful to the end. That's the expectation of our Lord. First, Jesus commands his people to do what is seemingly impossible.

Do you see that? Very first phrase in verse 10. Do not fear what you're about to suffer. And then he goes on in the very next phrase and says what you're about to suffer actually is that some of you are going to be imprisoned and executed.

10 days here is probably not meant to be taken as a literal 10 day time frame. It's meant to be representative of a full and yet limited short term type of persecution that they're going to endure. It will be limited because it's going to lead very quickly to their death. Jesus essentially says this, Satan is about to have you thrown into prison and killed.

And I'm going to let him do it. I'm going to let him do it. But don't be afraid. What? What do you mean don't be afraid?

[34 : 41] How can you not be afraid? How can you not be absolutely terrified? But Jesus does not give this as a suggestion.

This is an imperative. He says do not be afraid. Do not be afraid. Even our suffering. What stands out here is that Jesus speaks as being in total control of it.

He's in total control of this situation. Even our suffering is part of God's plan to strengthen our faith, to display his glory, to promote his gospel.

I think it was Tertullian said that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. Historically, that's what we've seen happen. Could it be that that's God's design? Yes.

And make no mistake, Jesus says it plainly, Satan is the agent of our persecution. But what Satan intends as a temptation to lure us away from the gospel, God uses as a test to actually draw his people out in faithfulness.

[35 : 47] James tells us this plainly. James chapter one, count it all joy, brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds. For you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.

And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. In other words, James says, count it all joy because God is using your suffering to draw you out, to make you more faithful, to strengthen your faith and your closeness with him.

James goes on to say, blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

Is that not an echo of the Lord Jesus' words here? Jesus taught that this kind of persecution would ultimately prove who is a true Christian and who is not.

Do you remember his parable about the soils? In Mark 4, he said, these are the ones who are sown on rocky ground. Those who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy, but they have no root in themselves, they endure for a while, then when tribulation and persecution arises on account of the word, they immediately fall away.

[37 : 06] How does God use persecution and opposition for his glory? Well, he weeds out those who are not actually serious Christians that are truly converted, and he exposes them.

But then he actually exposes the glory of the gospel in those who remain faithful, and he uses that to win more and more people to Jesus Christ.

The second part of this charge is that while enduring the persecution, Jesus wants us to remain faithful. Be faithful unto death, he says.

It's not the only time the Lord makes this kind of statement. The New Testament is full. Statements just like that. But is it really fair and reasonable for Jesus to have this kind of expectation of his people?

I think that's an important question for us to ask and to take seriously. Because what the answer to that question is determines whether or not he's actually a just God or whether we're wasting our time.

[38 : 16] And we need to wrestle with it. Here's how Jim Hamilton says it. Only Jesus could make this demand. Only Jesus has the ability to reward those who would obey.

Jesus is worth dying for. And if he's worth dying for, then he's worth living for. Only those who are gripped by something worth more to them than life can be truly courageous.

And courage is precisely what Jesus calls the church in Smyrna too. He is proclaiming to them that he is better than life.

And how is it that he is better to life than life? Well, look at the promise at the end of the verse. The one who died and came to life will give all who persevere the crown of life.

I heard a missionary say one time, he was a missionary to the Middle East and he had gone through some significant trials and persecutions, his life threatened on many occasions. And he had gotten to a point where his faith was so strong in the gospel that he would say, you can't threaten me with heaven.

[39 : 30] He had this gospel perspective that even facing the severest, most terrifying persecutions, he was so trusting in the gospel of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus that all he could see was the life of blessing that comes after.

And that's what Jesus is promising here. For all who are faithful unto the end, I will give you the crown of life. Well, how can we know he'll give us the crown of life? Because he's the one who was dead but came back to life.

He's conquered death for us. And he offers this eternal life to all who will truly love and trust him. we don't need to fear death because for the believer death leads to true life.

To be honest, this life is easy to trade for the one who knows that Jesus will usher them into a life that is far better. It's not what Paul said, for me to live is Christ but to die is gain.

in our adventure club a couple of weeks ago one of the kids, it might have been Gus, was asking about things about heaven and how the mystery of that is sometimes frightening because all we know is this life and this world and there's so many things that we love about this life and what the Lord has blessed us with here.

[40 : 56] And the answer I think that Amy gave him was something to the effect of imagine how great this life is and the blessings that God gives here and yet he promises that those who know him will receive something far better.

We can't even comprehend what this crown of life will be like. We can't even begin to comprehend what this life is. Is this life in a fallen world worth trading for that one?

Oh my goodness. Surely it is. Says Martin Luther, let goods and kindred go. This mortal life also. The body they may kill. God's truth abideth still. His kingdom is forever. This world and its riches and whatever glory it has, it will fade.

It will pass away. That's what we learn in the revelation. God's going to destroy it all. And only those who persevere unto death will receive the new heavens and the new earth and eternity with our Lord and Savior.

[42 : 03] That is far better than anything that we know here. So be faithful unto death. Then we conclude with this call and conquer in verse 11.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death. The truth is we all fear death.

Part of that fear is just the mystery of it, isn't it? We don't know when it's going to come, where it's going to come, how it's going to happen. It could be in a moment. We don't know. That's terrifying. It's frightening. Outside of Jesus, no one has ever faced death and then come back to let us know what it's like so that we can cope through it. Nobody has ever done that.

We all face it with the same mystery and none of us want to face it. We don't want to experience pain. We don't want to consider leaving people behind that we love so much and wondering will we ever see them again?

[43 : 04] This is not the fear of death that Jesus is addressing in this text. That's not what he's dealing with here. So if you're an anxious Christian when it comes to the mystery of death, well join the club.

I'm right there with you. I'm not looking forward to that, to be honest. And it would be weird if you were in that sense. Don't mistake this text as a condemnation of you as a Christian because you fear the mystery of it.

That's not what Jesus is addressing. But if you are someone who fears death because you're completely uncertain about what awaits you after it, well Jesus has something to say to you actually.

The Bible makes it clear that God creates us as eternal beings. We have an eternal soul that will live forever somewhere and in some state. And this is what Jesus means by the second death. death. To die in your natural sinful condition will result in this separation from God in the torments of eternal hell.

[44 : 06] That's the second death according to Revelation 20 and 21. But Jesus offers salvation from eternal death for anyone who conquers.

That's what he says. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death. And to conquer is to put your total faith and trust in him as the conqueror.

That's the point. On the cross he bears God's wrath for sinners so that all who turn to him receive forgiveness because of what he has absorbed for us.

And in his resurrection he proves that he alone has victory over life and death. And he can give us life. And all who will believe and follow him will receive that life.

That's his promise. No matter what happens here we will receive that life. Romans 10 tells us very plainly you say well how do I do that? Well it's very clear. Confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead and you will be saved.

[45 : 20] For with the heart man believes unto righteousness and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the scriptures say everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.

That's the promise of Jesus. If you conquer you will receive the crown of life. You will not be hurt by the second death.

Well how can I conquer? You can't. You can't. He conquered for you. And he says just believe me. Confess me.

Give yourself wholeheartedly to me. And no matter what happens in this life it can't touch you. Death that is. You will live in eternity with me.

But only if you will follow me. Only if you will trust me. So why wait? Why risk it? Why not receive this wonderful love and grace displayed through the work of Jesus Christ?

[46 : 23] He offers you life. He has been victorious on your behalf. He only wants you. You. Turn from your sin. Cry out to him in faith.

He will save you. He will save you. You ever wonder if you know if I face what Polycarp faced I just I don't know that I have it in me to have that kind of resolve.

On Broad Street in Oxford England there is a marker in the middle of the road. It's just a simple cross. If you didn't know it was there you probably wouldn't even notice it. It's there as a dedication to what's known as the Oxford Martyrs.

This was Nicholas Ridley and Hugh Latimer and Thomas Cranmer. Thomas Cranmer is the interesting one in this particular story. Cranmer was an Anglican priest.

He served underneath Henry VIII and was partly responsible for helping the Church of England separate from the Roman Catholic Church and of course there's a whole history behind that.

Thomas Cranmer was hugely influential in all of that.

[47 : 34] It was Thomas Cranmer who wrote the two different editions of the Book of Common Prayer which is still the liturgical guide for the Anglican Church and it is hugely influential in even the forms of worship that we follow today.

If you come to a wedding or a funeral that I'm officiating in any way you're going to hear Cranmer. That's a part of it. It's just in the language and you don't even realize the influence that he still has on you today.

He is a towering figure in the English Protestant Reformation. That's who Cranmer is. Well if you remember your English history if you care anything about that you'll remember that eventually Mary Queen of Scots ascends to the throne she was devoutly Catholic.

Protestants called her Bloody Mary and the reason for that is because she was determined to destroy the Church of England and set up England's loyalty once again to the Roman Catholic Church which was controlled at that time primarily by Spain.

Mary Queen of Scots has the three Oxford martyrs arrested and for years Cranmer is in the imprisonment in Oxford and all of these Spanish scholars are there plaguing him day after day after day after day to get him to recant of his views publicly so or else they're going to take his life.

[48 : 56] They wanted him to publicly recant because it served their purposes well just like with Polycarp. He was so influential they thought that a public recantation would actually serve their purposes better than just taking his life right away.

Part of their torture of him was to actually take him out and force him to watch them burn at the stake his two friends Latimer and Ridley.

67 years old with a heart condition mentally, emotionally, physically exhausted. In the university or near the University Church of Oxford Cranmer recants he can't take it anymore.

The suffering's just too much. He signs the recantation papers and the only step left is that he must go to the University Church in Oxford, stand in the pulpit and read a drafted recantation by the Roman Catholic Church.

They needed this to be public. He signed the papers with his right hand and he goes to the University Church in Oxford and as soon as he gets into the pulpit he can't go through with it.

[50 : 05] And in that moment rather than read the recantation he admits and confesses what he's done in signing them but rejects the recantation and commits publicly to the true gospel of Jesus Christ.

Immediately Cranmer is dragged out of the pulpit he's literally dragged down the street to the same place that Latimer and Ridley were executed and as they're taking him out of the University Church he vows that because his right hand so offended God by signing those recantation papers that as the flames begin to burn he would be first to put his right hand in the fire.

So they light the fire and that's exactly what he does. As he prays out to God he holds his right hand in the fire so ashamed of the fact that he actually gave in for a season and he signed those papers. I hear a story like Cranmer's and I take comfort at least in one regard that even someone so influential and so faithful can be burdened by the weakness of suffering because I'm not sure that I could endure that either.

If I was forced to watch some of you suffer in the way that he had to watch his friends suffer I don't know that I could continue with that. And yet in the end I'm he's faithful.

[51 : 31] But how? It wasn't because Cranmer was better than you and me. It wasn't because he had a better understanding of the gospel than you and me.

In the end it is Christ who holds us in those moments. It's not our best efforts to be strong. it is in Christ's power to preserve his people.

And even in the darkest moments of weakness if you're afraid that you won't be able to do it if you truly know Christ if you're truly following him he will preserve your faith.

And this is upheld in the scriptures. Philippians 1.6 I am sure of this Paul says he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion.

First Thessalonians 5 May the God of peace himself sanctify you completely. And may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of the Lord Jesus.

[52 : 37] He who calls you is faithful. He will do it. Jude 24 Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy to the only God our Savior Jesus Christ be glory and majesty and glory.

dominion and authority before all time now and forevermore. He said I don't know if I can do it. You can't. He will do it. He will do it.

The one who conquers only does so by the gracious preserving work of God in their life. And if you truly know and follow Jesus you can trust that he will hold you fast.

Especially when you're unable to bear up on your own. So take courage. He is good. He is faithful. And because he is faithful you will be faithful. He who has an ear to hear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. NINGNINGNINGNINGNINGNINGNINGNINGNINGNINGNINGNINGNINGNINGNINGNING

