

True Courage: Smyrna

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Date: 22 September 2002

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[0 : 00] We'll be looking at this letter of our Lord Jesus Christ to the people of Smyrna on Revelation chapter 2, if you would open your Bibles there. The title of this talk is True Courage. I want to ask, as my question this morning, what is true courage?

What does it mean to be courageous? In looking at the letter to the Smyrnans, I'd like to define it this way. True courage means holding fast to the reality of Jesus Christ without ever flinching. True courage means holding fast to the reality of Jesus Christ no matter what, without ever flinching. You know, our faith and our lives go through times of testing.

The events of our lives bring testing to us. Has your faith ever been tested? Have you ever had to take your faith out and put it on the road and see how it performed?

A moment of testing for my faith came about three years ago when my son Jonathan was born. It wasn't just testing that he was born, but the test came shortly afterwards.

[1 : 14] We realized very soon after he was born that he was very sick and developed a liver disease, a fatal liver disease. And we were told that he would have to have a major operation with an uncertain outcome, which he had when he was three weeks old.

And suddenly that faith of mine, which had been fumbling along the comfortable back lanes of England, where it was all warm and sunny and spring eternally.

Suddenly that faith was put to the test in a very big way. I was jolted out of my normal range of experience. My wife and I were taken out of that comfortable range in which we lived our Christian lives, and we had to go way beyond our experience.

Of course, we found ourselves asking huge questions of life and of God. What if Jonathan needed a liver transplant? What if the operation wasn't successful? Or what if he would be damaged by the operation?

What if he died? And suddenly we were forced to probe into the depths of the limits of our faith. If this happens, can I walk with God?

[2 : 27] But if this happens, is God still trustworthy? But what if this happens? Can I still walk with God? Does it mean that God doesn't love us anymore?

Now, anyone who has met my son knows that things went very well for him. He is a vibrant, healthy, noisy little boy. But the operation he had was a fix, and we're really grateful for that, but not necessarily a cure.

And perhaps down the road again, we may have to go into that time of testing. And when we were in hospital with him, we met other parents who had to go right down the line. Parents whose children sickened and died.

What if the very worst thing happens to you? What if you lose that which is most precious to you? How do I walk through that?

How do I walk through that and face the worst thing that can happen and still hold on to God? Now, in a way, that is what this letter to the Smyrnans is about. These people are facing a time of testing.

[3 : 33] A testing that puts their faith on the road. Smyrna is a city in modern-day Turkey, now called Izmir. At the time of writing Revelation, mid-late first century, it was wealthy and rivaled Ephesus, who we heard about last week, for preeminence.

It was a pagan city and one that very quickly got into the emperor worship. They were very keen on that cult. At the same time, there was a significant Jewish community there who hated the Christians.

Now, the Christians were a small group. They were materially poor and they were being squeezed. They were squeezed between the Jewish community and their hostility to them. They were squeezed between the pagan community and their hostility to them.

There was pressure on them. Pressure to compromise the faith by, you know, burning its ends to the emperor. There was theological pressure. Heresy kind of sweeping through, as it did so often and does so often.

Pressure just to compromise on the faith, to compromise on the reality of Jesus Christ. And it is into the situation of testing and pressure that Jesus speaks to them.

[4 : 42] And what he says to them is this, essentially. You are strong in me. I know what you're going through. I can handle it. So don't be afraid.

He's telling them that they are strong in him. That he can handle what they're going through. He knows what they're going through. So they're not to be afraid. And that is what Jesus is saying to many people, to all of us here today.

People, for many different reasons, are under pressure. Maybe your life is under pressure. Or your faith is under pressure. You are scared. You are uncertain about what you're facing.

And Jesus says, I know what you're going through. I can handle it. Be strong in me. Do not be afraid. Well, let's take a look at this passage.

Because Jesus is offering more than just words of comfort here. He is offering a reality to these people. And it's important to just look at the text and see what reality is he's offering. If you look at the text, I want to look at verses 9 and 10 in particular.

[5 : 45] You see that the words he is giving them are words of experience. And they are words of authority. First, let's look at verse 9. It is his words of experience. I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich.

I know the slander on the part of those who say they are Jews and are not. But are a synagogue of Satan. Now, this line of discourse runs through the letters to the seven churches.

And what Jesus is saying to them is, look, I know. It's a very strong line. I know where you're at. I know what you're going through. It's more than just, I've heard.

I perceive. He's saying, I know. I have experience of this. I have been there. I know what you're going through. What does he say he knows about them?

He knows their affliction. He knows their poverty. He knows what it is to be slandered by those who call themselves Jews, but are a synagogue of Satan.

[6 : 46] And isn't that quite right? Isn't it true that Jesus knows exactly that? He who had all the wealth and all the power gave it all up for the utter poverty of being a human being.

Jesus knew that. Jesus knows all about what the Smyrnians are experiencing. Imagine the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus faced the terror of the cross and the complete dereliction of that moment, the complete isolation when he had nothing left.

He knows. Consider his trial, which was nothing other than a stitch up on the part of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. And he says, I know what you're going through.

I know what it is to be lied about. I know what it is to have affliction. I know what it is to be slandered. I know what you're going through. I have been there myself.

But don't give up hope because your power, your richness comes from your faith. Your richness comes from your relationship with me. Now imagine if Jesus came and said to you, you are rich in me.

[7 : 52] Or what if he said that to us as a church? You are rich in me. That's affirmation. But you see, these are the words of someone who has experience, personal experience of what the Smyrnians are experiencing.

He is empathizing with them because he knows. And what that says about the person writing these words is that he is not just some spirit speaking out of a cloud. Nor is he an angel who floated down and had a little word with the people there.

No, this is someone personal. This is someone who experienced human life. That means Jesus isn't just an apparition. Jesus is human.

This is not Jesus just existing as God. This is Jesus speaking as human, as someone who lived through human experience. These are words of experience.

But second, they are words of authority. Verse 10, he says to them, do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested.

[8 : 58] And for 10 days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death. And I will give you the crown of life. And so it would be. It was not easy for the church in Smyrna.

One of the early Christian martyrs, Bishop Polycarp, was bishop in Smyrna. And he was executed there in about the year 151. And the story is that members of that same Jewish synagogue broke the Sabbath to help gather the wood to build the fire on which he was killed.

Oh yes, severe testing to death would come to Smyrna. Affliction would come. But it is something that would prove their faith and would be profitable for them.

And as you'll see for us. But you see, the person speaking these words is speaking from an eternal perspective. From this perspective of authority. Someone who can look into the present and future events and look beyond them.

These are the words of someone who can offer life and presumably mean it. Someone who can take someone from eternal, prevent someone from going into eternal death and offer them the crown of life.

[10:09] And these people in Smyrna are going to face immense pressure, immense pressure to give up the faith. Thrown into prison. Offered the choice between execution or giving in.

Between burning a little bit of incense before the emperor. Or execution and death. That wants to put their faith right to the test. You're in prison and you have a choice to make.

And in the early church, a lot of Christians caved in. There were huge disputes in the early church. What do you do when someone caves in like that? How do you receive them back into the church? Or do you? Some Christian leaders caved in for what seemed like really good reasons. I mean, to preserve people's lives. People were being killed. To preserve property.

To preserve property. Because it would be confiscated. To wait out persecution until better times came. Let's just quietly put our heads down. Let's just do what we have to do. And then when better times come, we can get on with business.

[11:08] It's very understandable. It's very human. And yet, Jesus says to the Smyrnans, do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer.

Be faithful. Be faithful until death. And I will give you the crown of life. These are not just comfortable words of an ordinary person. These are the words of someone with eternal authority. Can you imagine that the Smyrnans, these young Christians, this little church, are facing that ultimate abyss of death. They don't know what it's going to be like. They don't know what they're heading to. And Jesus says, but be faithful until death.

And I will give you a crown of life. Now, either those words are completely hollow and rhetorical. Or they are concrete and real.

If they are rhetorical and hollow, then we might as well all retire now to Starbucks and spend our morning having a coffee together. Because without that reality, if Jesus doesn't have that authority to say that, then Christianity is emptied of all its power and meaning.

[12:17] And we have no purpose being here. But if they are the words of someone who has that authority, who has that power, then they are giving a concrete and real offer here.

For they are the words of someone who has experienced suffering, has experienced death, and has the authority to confer eternal life after death. The crown of life.

He has authority. And that means that the person saying these words, Jesus Christ, our Lord. He was someone who was personal. He was human. He is human.

He experienced human reality. But he holds together in his reality divinity. He is God. He is someone who brought the nature of God into human reality.

And he is someone who brought human being back to heaven. He has the authority. He is God. Whoever has that power. And is he fühlitive.

[13:15] all sorts of different ways. It comes in those moments when we weigh up our faith with what is happening around us. We weigh up what the Bible tells us with the values and morals of the world around us.

And we wonder, if I take my faith to its conclusion, what will it cost me? What will it cost us? Or again, we wonder if the very worst thing that can happen to me happens.

If I lose the thing I love the most, if I lose the person I love the most, if I lose my job or my house or my life, is that the end of the line with God? How far can I walk with God?

And some of us are facing testing in our faith through reasons of health. Our lives are on the line. With my son, when he was so ill, I realized that I had to entrust him to God no matter what.

No matter what the outcome, I had to lay him in Jesus' arms and trust. And that's not easy. Your faith gets put to the test in times like that.

[14:29] I am deeply afraid of losing my son. But then I realize God lost his son and knows all about it. Or maybe you are facing losing your life in great suffering.

And you're wondering, how can God help me now? And then you realize God lost his life in great suffering. He knows all about it. Some people here are being tested to stand firm in their faith. Because it is coming into conflict with the values of the world. It's easy to be in conflict with the values of the world when it's out there. And it's just the world out there. But suddenly, when those values are in your place of work, it's harder then to stand firm in your faith.

Or what about in your family? What if there is a conflict between the values of the Bible, between what the Bible is telling us to be true and what your family believes?

And you're being forced to choose between standing utterly firm in your faith, on the rock that is Jesus and his word, in conflict with your family, with your fellow workers, with the world.

[15:44] We are being tested. Times like that force us to define our faith clearly. Are we willing to stand firm no matter what? The Smyrnans did.

We know that the Smyrnans did. We have the documents. When Bishop Polycarp was executed, he was rounded up during a pagan festival. This is about the year 155. So it's quite a ways after the book of Revelation.

And he said that he had served Christ faithfully for 86 years. And he refused to recant. And so he went to the flames for his death. And in the second century, a heresy went through Smyrna.

They were being challenged over their faith in Jesus Christ. And the leaders of the church in Smyrna wrote these words. We too worship only one God, but as we understand it.

We too hold Christ to be the Son of God, but as we understand it. Who suffered as he suffered, died as he died, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father, and will come to judge the living and the dead.

[16:51] That was written before we had a book of common prayer, before the Creed of Nicaea was written. That is the clearest, most simple statement of the faith that you can get. And that is the faith the people of Smyrna stood on and stood in.

They are words to us today. They faced testing. They faced death. They faced heresy. They stood on the reality of Jesus Christ. How can they be so sure?

How can they stand so firm on the reality of Jesus Christ? Because these are the words of the first and the last, who was dead and who came to life.

That is why. That is why Jesus could speak with such knowledge and such power and authority to the Smyrnans and to us. That is why Jesus can speak with authority because of who he is.

I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is and who was and who is to come. I am the first and the last and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever.

[17:56] And I have the keys of death and Hades. In Isaiah, God says, I am the first and the last. Beside me there is no other God.

And what Jesus is making quite clear here is his absolute authority and sovereignty over all of creation because he is God. He is a sovereign being.

He is not beholden to anyone or anything. He is the first and the last. That means he is God's agent of creation. He was there before the world was created.

He is God's preeminent word. He was never created but was always there. He is the first and he is the last. He has authority over human history. He will wrap up human history when he is ready.

He is the first and the last. He is peerless. He is second to none. He is the Lord Jesus Christ. He was dead and is alive. It comes out so powerfully in the text.

[18:57] It's not just saying he fainted and came back to life. Nor is it saying he had a near-death experience and revived. No, Jesus was dead and is alive.

And what that means is this man, Jesus Christ, who is God, experienced the depth of human suffering, human pain, and human death. He made the hardest choice anyone could make to enter into that unknown abyss of death in the faith that it would work out.

And he conquered. He was dead and lives. And that means he has authority over death and hell. He has complete authority over their sphere.

And for those who remain firm in Jesus, there is nothing that can harm them. No one can take away your salvation. And so the promise he's making to the people of Smyrna is real.

It's concrete. It is eternal. He is speaking as someone who has experienced the very worst that we can experience. And he is speaking as someone who has complete authority over everything.

[20 : 06] Christ possesses life. And as the last word, the Smyrnans knew that. They knew that Jesus could be completely trusted. They knew that Jesus alone could save them.

And they remained firm in the faith. That is true courage. To hold fast to Jesus Christ and his reality. And never flinch. Amen.