

"Fear of Suffering"

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, church. Friends, one thing we do here at Trinity is that we do our very best to humbly preach God's Word.

We try hard to take our key and our tune from Scripture. And so what that means is that whenever we come to a passage which talks about difficult things, we do not shy away.

This morning, the two subjects that Scripture presents for us are difficult for many. These two things are the subjects of suffering and death.

These are the two things in this world that most people would do anything to avoid. Most people, in fact, don't even like to talk about these things. But today, our passage in Scripture has much to say about suffering and death, and so we're going to take these subjects head-on.

This is important to do because if you haven't noticed, suffering and death are two things that hard as we try, we cannot avoid. They are inescapable, and because of this, people fear them above all else.

[1 : 1 0] But Christian, I wonder, what about you? Are you afraid of suffering? Are you afraid of death?

What do you do, or what should you do when faced with these things? Perhaps you are suffering now. How are you enduring? Perhaps you know that your end is coming.

How are you responding? Well, if you find yourself afraid, and we all do at times, if you find yourself afraid of these things, then take heart, because the letter we are about to read has good counsel for you.

In this letter, in the book of Revelation, Jesus tells the ancient church of Smyrna that they are going to suffer, and that some of them may even die. But Jesus says to them to not be afraid.

And He promises that He will defeat suffering and death. And what He promises to them, He promises to you, O Christian. So let us walk through these things this morning.

[2 : 2 0] The passage we have before us can be found in the book of Revelation, chapter 2, verses 8 through 11. This corresponds with page 965 in your pew Bible.

And just by way of reminder, the author of the book of Revelation is John the Apostle, a disciple of Jesus. And in this book of Revelation, Jesus has appeared to John in a heavenly vision, and He's currently dictating letters to John to send to local churches in Asia Minor.

And this brief letter we have before us today was addressed to the church in ancient Smyrna. And this little letter reads like this. And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, the words of the first and the last who died and came to life.

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.

Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation.

[3 : 3 5] Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. 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. Here Jesus counsels the church in Smyrna not to fear suffering and to be faithful even unto death.

And these will be our two themes this morning. First, we will start with a little bit of background to this letter. We'll sketch out the historical context to help us understand the sufferings that the church in Smyrna was facing and what they were to face.

And then we'll focus on two things. First, what Jesus says about suffering. And second, what Jesus says about death. And we will see what counsel he gives to those who face such things.

And we'll see what counsel he gives to you. Let's pray together. Oh, Father in heaven, we thank you for your word. We thank you for its timeliness.

[4 : 43] And Lord, for how you cut to our hearts with it. Father, we pray that through your word this morning you would give consolation and comfort and encouragement to those who are suffering and to those who face death.

Lord, we pray that we would treasure your word in our hearts. Lord, that if now we do not face these things, that in the future when we do, we will remember your counsel and we would cast ourselves upon you, the one who has conquered suffering and death.

Father, we pray all this in the name of Jesus. Amen. Let us begin with a little bit of historical background to this letter.

Remember, this letter was written to the ancient church in Smyrna. And Smyrna was a very wealthy city in the ancient world. It was known for its spices, for trade, and its beautiful buildings.

And it was also one of the chief centers of imperial worship of the Roman emperor. It was, in fact, specially selected for this purpose.

[5 : 50] What this means is that the people of Smyrna would have been making sacrifices to the Roman emperor pretty much every day. And along with this, Smyrna also had a vibrant Jewish community.

But it must be noted that of all the different ethnic groups in the Roman Empire, Jews at this time were exempted from the requirements of emperor worship by special agreement with the government.

This means that while probably everyone in Smyrna was required to worship the Roman emperor, the Jewish inhabitants likely were not. And all these things help us to understand Jesus' words to the church in Smyrna, because when we take this letter and we place it in the light of these historical facts, we can draw some reasonable conclusions.

First, it seems, for example, that the Christians of Smyrna must have felt pressure to worship the Roman emperor due to the imperially backed Roman cult that was present in the city.

And in fact, this pressure may have been immense. Along with this, Christians also would have been living amongst very wealthy people. They would have lived among people who flaunted their riches, who had opulent homes, who possessed many servants and slaves.

[7 : 07] Yet, as Jesus tells us in his letter to the church, the Christians in Smyrna were poor. Furthermore, as I said, we know from the historical record that there was a vigorous and thriving Jewish population.

We gleaned from the letter that the Jewish community of Smyrna seems to have been slandering the Christians of Smyrna. They seem to have been saying that the Christians were not actually Jews.

That is, that they were not actually worshiping the God of Israel. This is relevant because, as I mentioned before, the Jews of Smyrna, like all Jews in the Roman Empire, they were exempted from worshiping the Roman emperor.

We know also, from reading the book of Acts, that in the early days of the church, Christians would often worship in synagogues, since in the early church, most Christians were Jews to begin with. So the reasonable inference here is that in a place like Smyrna, there was immense pressure to worship the emperor. But despite this, Christians could likely have found a safe haven, a shelter from persecution, but only if they worshipped in the local synagogue.

[8 : 19] This, for example, is something that even the apostles did for a time in the early church, where the apostles continued to identify as Jews and worship in the synagogues. We see this throughout the book of Acts.

But there was a problem in Smyrna, because the letter in Revelation says that the Jews in Smyrna were slandering the Christians and saying that they were not Jews.

A reasonable conclusion that scholars have made from these things is that the Christians of Smyrna, who had sought refuge in the synagogues, had been kicked out of the synagogues, and therefore they were exposed to persecution and the forced worship of the Roman emperor.

They seemed to have been accused by ethnic Jews of not being faithful to the God of Israel, because they followed the Messiah Jesus. And hence these Christians were excommunicated from the synagogue, and the result is that they were no longer exempted from worshiping the emperor, and they were exposed to persecution if they remained faithful to Christ.

Taken altogether, we can conclude that the church in Smyrna was suffering. They were poor. They were slandered. And as the passage explains, they soon would suffer imprisonment.

[9 : 37] But what does Jesus say to the church in Smyrna in view of these things? What word does Jesus have for those in Smyrna who are suffering? Remember, Christian, what Jesus says to the church in Smyrna, he in many ways says to you.

So let me rephrase that question. Instead of, what word does Jesus have for those in Smyrna who are suffering? Let us ask this morning, what word does Jesus have for you who are suffering or who are facing death?

Let us start first with what Jesus says about suffering, and then secondly, we'll discuss what Jesus says about death. So let's begin.

In Revelation 2-9, the first thing Jesus says to those who are suffering is this, I know your tribulation.

Friends, are you suffering today? Jesus says to you, I know your tribulation. You are not forgotten by God.

[10 : 44] He knows your tears. He knows your doubt. He knows your pain. If you are jobless, homeless, anxious, hopeless, He knows these things. If you are called at work to stand firm in the gospel and so to risk your career or your income, if you're called to cease from sin and jeopardize your relationships with your family or your friends, all for the sake of Jesus, whatever it is you are suffering, whether it is bodily illness or external oppression or mental anguish, whatever it may be, Jesus says to you, I know your tribulation.

Jesus is not blind to these things. He knows. He sees. He understands. Scripture declares in Hebrews chapter 218, because Jesus himself has suffered when tested, he is able to help those who are being tested.

Friends, this is the first thing Scripture says to you who are suffering. Jesus knows. Jesus is aware. Jesus is intimately familiar with suffering. He is not unacquainted with these things.

He himself suffered, and so he's able to help you who are being tested by suffering. You are not alone. You are not forgotten by God. Jesus knows.

Every tear you have shed and every drop you have bled. Be comforted in this, my brothers and sisters. But there's a second word that Jesus has for you who are suffering.

[12 : 20] He goes on to say to the church of Smyrna in Revelation 2.9, He says, I know your poverty, but you are rich.

To put this another way, though it appears, Jesus says, that you are poor now, you in actuality are rich. Though it appears that you are suffering now in the heavenly and spiritual reality that Jesus has ushered in, all these hardships, are working together for your good, both now and in the future. And this is not some far-off promise of spiritual riches. It is a promise of spiritual riches that can be redeemed here and now in the present moment, in this very instant.

This is why Jesus says to the church, I know your poverty, but you are rich. Jesus does not say, I know your poverty, take heart, you will be spiritually rich in the future when I return.

Instead, He says, I know your poverty, but you are rich here and now. This idea that the heavenly blessings in Christ are present now is illustrated by Jesus' promise in the Gospel of Mark in chapter 10.

[13 : 42] Jesus says, Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake or for the sake of the Gospel who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands with persecutions and in the age to come eternal life.

but many who are first will be last and the last first. Notice here the promises of Jesus for you, Christian. He says that if you follow Me, you will suffer in this life, but in the life, this life, you also will receive a hundredfold in return.

You'll receive spiritual friends and spiritual brothers and sisters and spiritual children and houses and countries. And Jesus says, in the future, though you are last now, you will be first then.

Hence, if we return to the church in Smyrna, Jesus says that though Smyrna was at that time poor in an earthly sense, in actuality, they were rich towards God in that very moment.

And Jesus says the same to you, Christian. Though you may be poor now, you are rich in God. And this goes for all kinds of suffering, whatever form it may take, be it poverty, physical pain, despair, slander, betrayal, persecution, or anything else.

[15 : 21] If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, there is not just a renewed body awaiting for you in heaven, but even now, you walk, you run in the spiritual gifts.

You possess the unsurpassable gifts and abilities of the Holy Spirit. These are yours now. Joy, hope, love, fellowship with the saints and with God above.

If you weep now, those tears are being and will be wiped away. If you suffer slander, take heart because in this moment, you're found innocent before God and you will also be found innocent in the day of judgment.

If you suffer today with the shackles of addiction, you can be freed now and in the future, those temptations will pass away forever when Jesus comes.

All this to say that if in this life, in this world, you are suffering, what Jesus promises and what he calls you to recognize is that an actual reality of the matter is that day by day there are blessings being poured out on you this very moment and there is spiritual treasure stored up for you in heaven in the world to come.

[16 : 43] Well, friends, from these, we can derive a third word that Jesus says to those who are suffering. The church in Smyrna was poor, but Jesus said they were rich.

This is an example of a profound gospel truth. It turns out that when you are suffering in the path of obedience to Jesus, God has promised that he will take your sufferings and he does not simply bless you in a general spiritual way in the present moment in your suffering, but he takes your suffering and he works upon it with a kind of precise antidote, a counter agent that turns that specific suffering, that turns that specific evil into an exact corresponding and matching gift.

So if you are poor in this world, then faithfully, humbly, enduring that poverty makes you rich in God.

If you are slandered in this world, then patiently persevering in that slander by God's grace turns that slander into vindication.

If you are abandoned by friends or family for following Christ, then you are called the friend of God. And you receive the fellowship of the Holy Spirit and the fellowship of spiritual brothers and sisters in Christ and this kind of spiritual inversion where God turns your suffering into blessing.

This is the very thing that Jesus promises in his Sermon on the Mount. He says, blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

[18 : 24] Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. What we've covered so far is this. Remember, when you are suffering, remember first, God knows and understands, for he suffered also.

He has not abandoned you. You are not alone. He is with you. Secondly, though you are suffering, you are blessed both in the world to come and in this present world.

You are blessed in the here and now as well as in the hereafter. And thirdly, God takes that specific suffering you are enduring and he works a corresponding blessing through your patient and faithful endurance by his grace.

Now I know and understand what toil and hardships suffering can be. I understand how such things can blind you from seeing these spiritual promises and spiritual realities.

As many of you are aware, I was born with a severe heart defect. I've had two open heart surgeries. I have more surgeries to come. I know what it is like to be a boy in agony in a hospital bed crying, Lord, why is this happening to me?

[19 : 42] Why have you allowed me to suffer? I know what it is to see all the other children grow healthy and able to run and play in ways that I could not.

For many years, friends, I grew bitter against God. I could not see his promises for me. But then, brothers and sisters, Jesus Christ stepped into my life and what I learned from him is that in Christ Jesus who suffered for us, in him our suffering works an eternal weight of glory that is not worthy to be compared with anything in this world.

The Apostle Paul speaks of this. He says to the Corinthians, for this light, momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison as we look not to things that are seen but to the things that are unseen.

for the things that are seen are transient but the things that are unseen are eternal. Friends, those of you who have tasted this weight of glory beyond all comparison, you know of what I speak.

And those of you who have not yet tasted this truth, come to Jesus, behold him, and you will understand that all these sufferings of this world are nothing compared to knowing Christ.

[21 : 16] You see, friends, we worship a God who does not fear suffering. He himself came down into this world in the person of Jesus and he knowingly and willingly and volitionally suffered the punishment of a slave on the cross.

And he became like us in every way. Scripture says in the book of Hebrews, in the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to him who was able to save him from death.

And he was heard because of his reverence. And although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.

Christians, if Jesus became perfect through suffering, how much more will God take our imperfect lives and perfect them through the suffering we experience?

Therefore, on account of this, Jesus says to the church in Smyrna in Revelation 2.10, do not fear what you are about to suffer.

[22 : 32] The profound truth of the matter is, O Christian, that when you find yourself to be poor, turn to God and become rich. When you are in pain, cast yourself upon him and receive the consolation of his presence.

When you are lonely, receive the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. When you are betrayed or persecuted, go to the one who is betrayed and persecuted for you.

Endure suffering for Christ and Christ will redeem it. And therefore, do not fear suffering. Well, friends, we've discussed suffering, but there is one more important matter to cover.

We all must face suffering. That much is clear. But what of that other reality that we all must face? What about death?

death? This is unavoidable for us, too. So what words does Jesus say to us who are facing death? Jesus says this to the church in Smyrna in Revelation 2, 10 through 11.

[23 : 42] He says, Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life. 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. From these words, friends, we gather that this persecution that was to come upon the church in Smyrna was going to be very severe.

So Jesus exhorts them. He says, Be faithful unto death and he says this with a promise and I will give you the crown of life. It should be mentioned again that what Jesus says to the church in Smyrna, he says to you, Christian, Be faithful in all things even unto death and I will give you the crown of life.

By this, Jesus means that we should be willing to sacrifice all things in obedience to him and his word even at the cost of our lives just as Jesus laid his life down for us.

And by being faithful unto death, Jesus also means that we should be faithful to him throughout our whole lives even to the point of death.

[24 : 58] For you see, says Jesus, if you are faithful unto death, you will receive the crown of life and to the one who conquers, you will not be hurt by the second death.

Now, this phrase, the second death, can be mysterious to some but it's clear from the scriptures that Jesus is speaking of that second death of hell.

That second death that comes after bodily death where one is eternally cast from the presence of God. And if this is the second death, then logically the first death is the earthly death when our earthly body passes away.

And so given this, there are two kinds of deaths from Jesus' perspective. The first death is that which is the earthly or bodily death that we all face. And the second death is that which takes place in hell and is reserved for those who reject Jesus.

We as Christians, we all face the first death, the death of our bodies. But afterwards, we are all rescued from it. We are rescued from that first death by being resurrected.

[26 : 16] resurrected. And then when judgment comes, we are spared from the second death by being redeemed and forgiven by Jesus. So we as Christians do not face the second death at all.

Logically then, if we are resurrected after the first death and we do not face the second death, then what can we conclude but that we should not fear either death?

Christian, the sum of what I'm saying is this. When your end is coming, when your time on this earth hastens to a close, when the sun is setting on your life, whether you have lived many or few years, whatever age you are in, when the door to this world is closing, then you have nothing to fear.

Jesus has promised to resurrect you from this death and he has promised that you will not be hurt by the second death. And the whole New Testament proclaims that Jesus will rescue you from these things.

In fact, the whole New Testament proclaims that Jesus came to die in your place to destroy death. The whole purpose of Jesus departing from his throne in heaven and becoming human and partaking of flesh and blood was so that he might die to destroy death for you and for God's glory. [27 : 47] Scripture says in Hebrews chapter 2, since therefore the children, that's us, since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, Jesus himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.

And so for you, Christian, when you are facing death, when your end is coming, do not fear. Jesus has destroyed the power of death and the grave.

And therefore, Jesus says to the church in Smyrna, be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life. And he adds, the one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.

But after all these things, I should mention there is also in Jesus' letter to the church in Smyrna an additional word of consolation about facing death.

This is at the very beginning of the letter. It's in Revelation chapter 2, verse 8. At the very start, Jesus announces himself and he says, quote, I am the first and the last who is dead and has come to life.

[29 : 14] In this verse, Jesus identifies himself as the one who was dead and who came to life. Brothers and sisters, what a precious Savior we have in Jesus.

He's able to rescue you from death because he's been there. He's gone down to the gates of hell in person. He fought death and won.

It is he who was dead and came to life again. He knows all about death. He went to its outer limits. He saw it face to face.

He descended to the pit. He let it come upon him and he defeated it for all time for you and for all you who believe. The grave, the tomb, the crypt, none of these things had power over Jesus. Scripture likens Jesus defeating death to Jesus defeating the great dragon or Jesus commuting your sentence or freeing you from prison or taking your place.

[30 : 19] And all this imagery serves to communicate that you do not need to fear death, O Christian. Death has died through Jesus Christ and you, when you die, you will live forever beholding your Savior face to face, which is better by far.

Christians, I have one final word of exhortation to you. Jesus says to the church in Smyrna in Revelation 2.10, he says to those Christians back then that some of them would be imprisoned for ten days and he counsels them to be faithful unto death.

And I wish I could tell you what the Christians in Smyrna suffered in that time and how they persevered in their imprisonment, but all that has been lost to history. We don't know exactly what happened regarding that imprisonment, but we do have another witness, another witness from a member of that very church in Smyrna who received this letter from Jesus.

History tells us that the Apostle John sent this letter to the church in Smyrna probably in the 80s or in the early 90s of the first century when he wrote the book of Revelation.

And it so happens that one of John's own disciples was actually from Smyrna itself and he went on to become the leader of the church in Smyrna.

[31 : 50] This man's name was Polycarp and it actually is very possible that Polycarp was even sitting in Smyrna's congregation on that very day when Jesus' letter in Revelation was read to them.

And we know a bit about Polycarp's life. We know it seems that he took this letter to heart because he remained steadfast in suffering through many decades of ministry.

We know this in part because of a letter that Polycarp wrote that we still have. He wrote this letter around 107 A.D. and he records this passage about suffering.

He says this, Let us therefore hold steadfastly and unceasingly to our hope and the guarantee of our righteousness who is Christ Jesus who bore our sins in his body upon the tree, who committed no sin and no deceit was found in his mouth.

Instead, for our sakes, he endured all things in order that we might live in him. Let us therefore become imitators of his patient endurance and if we should suffer for the sake of his name, let us glorify him.

[33 : 07] For this is the example he set for us in his own person and this is what we have believed. Friends, here Polycarp echoes Jesus' letter and exhorts his church in Smyrna to be faithful in suffering.

And many years later, Polycarp modeled not just what it is to suffer for Jesus, but also what it is to not fear death for Jesus. After a long and fruitful ministry, Polycarp was brought before a Roman governor who threatened to execute him if he did not deny Jesus.

And Polycarp uttered these words. He said, for 86 years I have been his servant and he has done me no wrong.

How can I blaspheme my king who saved me? And then with those words, Polycarp went off to die. Polycarp remembered Jesus' words to his congregation so many decades before.

The words where Jesus said, do not fear what you are about to suffer and be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life. Friends, the sum and total of our Christian life is to lay our lives down for Jesus.

[34 : 29] When suffering and death come upon you and they will, whether they come through persecution or bodily ailment or family catastrophe or through any other circumstance, then like Polycarp, remember our Lord Jesus who suffered for you and who died for you and become imitators of that patient endurance of Jesus.

Remember his words to the church in Smyrna, do not fear suffering and do not fear death for though for a time you will have to endure these things, Jesus knows your suffering and he is working for you in such things an eternal weight of glory and an everlasting spiritual treasure that you may partake of here and now and forevermore.

friends, let's pray together. Oh Father, we come to you and we bow our hearts before you. Lord, we pray for those of us who are suffering right now.

We pray, Lord, that you would comfort them, that you would encourage them. Lord, that you would bless them in the midst of trials and temptations and tests. We pray, Lord, that when we suffer we would turn to you and receive comfort and consolation from your Holy Spirit.

Father, we pray that we would not fear these things but that in them we would see that unsurpassable weight of glory that far outweighs all these things in this world.

[36 : 15] Lord, we pray that you would wipe away our tears, that you would help us to stand fast, Lord, if we face persecution, that you would help us to endure. Lord, we pray that you would give us joy in these things, that we would rejoice knowing that you are glorified and that, Lord Jesus, you will return.

And we pray this in the mighty name of Jesus. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.