

Faithful unto death

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- [0 : 00] Good, well please do turn in your Bibles to Revelation and Revelation chapter 2. And we're looking at verses 8 to 11 of Revelation chapter 2.
- You'll find that on page 1028 if you're using one of the church Bibles. This is the second of the seven letters that the Lord Jesus wrote to the churches in Asia.
- So verse 8 of chapter 2. 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 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.
- [1 : 17] 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. Amen. This is the word of the Lord.
- May he bless it to us this evening. Well, please do turn back to Revelation, and we'll be looking at these verses from chapter 2, verses 8 to 11, the letter to the church in Smyrna.
- The year is AD 154. The prisoner is a man named Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna.
- The Roman proconsul urged his prisoner, swear, and I will set you at liberty. Reproach Christ. What would Polycarp do?
- [2 : 30] He's a man in his 80s at this point, and he would have been in his late 20s when John's letter of Revelation arrived at the church. Polycarp, in all likelihood, would have heard the words of Revelation 2 read out in the church.
- Perhaps he himself read out these very words, words from the Lord Jesus that urged the church there in Smyrna to be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.
- With these words, no doubt etched into his mind, Polycarp answered the Roman proconsul with these words, 80 and 6 years I have served Christ, and he never did me any injury.
- How then can I blaspheme my King and Savior? With that refusal to approach Christ, Polycarp was executed, burnt at the stake in public.
- Having been faithful to the end, having been certain of the crown of life held out to him, he remained faithful.
- [3 : 44] Polycarp was a real and living example, not only of the reality of Christian suffering, but also as a fruit of this letter to the church in Smyrna.
- He lived out these words almost 60 years after first receiving them. He obeyed the word of his Savior. He was faithful unto death.
- So what was it that enabled Polycarp and countless others before and since to remain faithful unto death, to remain faithful in the face of fierce opposition and suffering?

Was Polycarp superhuman? Was he predisposed to bravery? It's tempting, isn't it, to put folk like Polycarp on a pedestal such that mere mortals like you and I can't possibly hope to emulate him.

That sort of faithfulness is beyond me, you might think. But I think that is a wrong inference to draw. Some of the bravest Christians I know and have met are very ordinary looking people indeed.

[4 : 56] Not the sort of folk you would think would be brave and courageous. But they are. And it can be so easy to forget, can't it, as folk who've grown up in unprecedented peace and stability for many centuries in a culture dominated and directed by Christian values, easy to forget.

It's easy to forget that suffering is normal for Christians. It has been down through the centuries. Jesus calls his church to take up his cross, doesn't it?

Suffering comes sooner or later to those who identify with Christ, our Lord and Savior, who himself suffered to the point of death.

And he calls those who follow him to that same pattern. Those who are Christ's are to live the cross-shaped life.

So what is it then that enables ordinary Christians, people just like you and me, to be faithful unto death?

[6 : 05] Well, let's allow this letter to the church in Smyrna to speak to us, to teach us, and to train us to that end, that we'd be faithful even unto death.

Two key points this evening. First, Jesus knows the suffering of his church. And second, Jesus strengthens his church for the suffering to come.

So first then, verse 9, Jesus knows the suffering of his church. We see then, verse 9, that he knows. Jesus knows the suffering his church endures.

He knows the nature of their suffering. And the very fact that Jesus knows brings comfort to those who suffer, doesn't it? He sees. He knows.

He sees everything. Nothing goes past him unnoticed. But Jesus sees not just what is visible. He doesn't just see what was experienced by the church there in Smyrna.

[7 : 04] He sees more. And what he sees brings true perspective to the church there in Smyrna. He sees their poverty, yes. But in reality, they're rich.

He sees the slander. But he sees the reality behind the slander. He sees the real source of it. Three things in particular that the Lord Jesus sees here about the church in Smyrna.

Three specific things about the nature of the suffering for the church there in Smyrna. Tribulation, poverty, and slander. First tribulation.

Jesus sees their tribulation, their affliction. And the word here refers to all sorts of troubles and hardships that the church may have been suffering in Smyrna, which would have been very painful indeed.

Smyrna was a city hostile to Christians. It was a city that had strong allegiances to Rome. It was the first city in the ancient world to build a temple in honor of the goddess Roma.

[8 : 14] It then built a second temple in honor of the emperor Tiberius. Strong links to Rome in this city in Asia. Strong links and the imperial cult would have made life very difficult indeed for Christians there who refused to bow down to Rome.

But not just that. There was a large Jewish population. And we'll see in a moment they were actively hostile to the church there in Smyrna. They suffered tribulation.

Jesus saw that. But he also sees their poverty. Their poverty is likely due to the general hostility they encountered in the city. The very fact that they were Christians and known as such would have made participation in the trade guilds that were the very hub of economic life in the city very difficult indeed.

One commentator makes the point that people living in Smyrna could aspire to economic prosperity and greater social standing only by participating to some degree in the Roman cult.

If you wanted to get ahead in Smyrna, if you wanted to have a good economic outlook, you had to be involved in the guilds and the Roman cult. But to be a Christian would have made it very difficult indeed.

[9 : 37] And so these Christians find themselves cut off from key networks in the city's economy. And they were consigned to a crushing poverty, barely able to make ends meet.

That's the meaning of that word poverty there, just about making it. Their businesses would lose credibility as soon as their Christian faith became more widely known.

And so these dear Christians there in Smyrna, they knew great material poverty. But the Lord Jesus sees that. He knows it.

But he knows more. Notice the parenthesis there in verse 9. But, he says, you are rich. Jesus sees the greater reality.

And he tells them. They may seem poor. And they certainly are that from a material, earthly perspective. But, in another sense, they are really very rich indeed.

[10 : 41] Quite the contrast to the church in Laodicea. Just look across the page, chapter 3, verse 17, where we get Jesus' assessment of the church there in Laodicea.

He says there in 3.17, For you say, that is the church in Laodicea, you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.

Not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. There is a wealth that is of no value at all.

And there is a wealth often hidden from the eyes of the world. A wealth that can't be seen on your bank statement. A wealth that really counts. And that is the wealth the church in Smyrna had.

It's the wealth that the church in Laodicea lacked. They were truly rich in the eyes of the Lord. Now, economic privation of the order known to the Smyrna Christians is not something that we've experienced really in the West, is it, for a long time.

[11 : 54] To be poor as a direct result of being an unashamed Christian. That concept is rather alien to you and I. But for how long?

Certain jobs, certain positions, certain careers may not be open to Christians because of particular views, particular things you're not prepared to compromise on.

When those days come, have those words etched into your mind. Yes, we may well be poor in the world's eyes, but in Jesus' eyes, we are rich.

But even if we don't experience the economic privation on the scale of Smyrna yet, there is still a sense in which, as Christians, we don't enjoy the fruit of wealth to the degree that we could enjoy it and that those around us do enjoy.

I think of friends of mine who enjoy good, but by no means high incomes. And they go on at least two exotic holidays every year. They have all the latest gadgets.

[13 : 07] Anything they want, they buy. They recently bought a lovely home, doing it up. They're living the sort of lifestyle that, well, I could live if it wasn't for the fact I was a Christian.

And that can be hard, can't it? To see others enjoying the good life now, enjoying all the comforts that we might be able to enjoy if it wasn't for the fact that we give to the Lord's work.

If it wasn't for the fact that we committed to being here Sunday by Sunday, not jetting off to Europe every other weekend. It's hard not to feel like we're missing out compared to our contemporaries.

I don't know about you, but I look at people I was at school with, and they're way up there, enjoying all the pleasures now. It's hard not to feel like we're missing out.

It doesn't much feel like it, does it, that Christians are the most privileged people in the world, according to Jesus. It doesn't much feel like we're rich. But there is a wealth that is of no value at all.

[14 : 16] And there is a wealth often hidden from the eyes of the world, a wealth that can't be seen on your bank statements, a wealth that really counts. In Jesus' eyes, if you're a follower of him, you are rich.

But it's not just tribulations and poverty that the church there in Smyrna were suffering. They were also slandered. Look at the end of verse 9 there.

The slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. The source of the slander is from those who identify as Jews.

But Jesus shows their true colors. Regardless of their heritage, they had become, through their fierce opposition to and slander of the church, they had become a synagogue carrying out the bidding of the great enemy himself, Satan.

Now, the exact nature of the slander we're not told. But certainly in the case of Polycarp, which I mentioned at the beginning, it was Jewish enemies who denounced Polycarp to the Roman authorities.

[15 : 32] Slander. And slander is a great weapon in the Satan's arsenal, isn't it? It intimidates. It demeans.

It destroys reputations. It sticks. People love to believe slander, don't they? Just think about all the accusations flying about in the media in recent months.

Now, some of those, of course, are true and terrible. But many, without consideration for any evidence, have been presumed guilty. A career has been ended.

The slander sticks. And likewise in the church, slander can bring down a ministry. Satan knows the effectiveness of slander to destroy churches, to destroy their witness, to discourage Christians.

But know that Jesus sees the truth. He saw right through those so-called Jews. He saw their true motivation. He saw their true leader. He saw it then, and he sees it today when it happens.

[16 : 46] So when you are slandered because of your faith, because of your unwillingness to deny Christ, know what and who really lies behind that attack.

And know, too, that Satan, although a powerful enemy, is a defeated enemy. That is one of the great realities of the book of Revelation. Satan, he's been defeated.

Christ is reigning. He's victorious. I remember back in my student days. It's gradually receding into my memory.

When I was a student, I was on the CU committee, the Christian Union committee there in Nottingham. And at the time, had agreed to do an interview with the student newspaper.

Now, looking back, it was a very foolish thing to agree to. But I was told that it was going to be a very wide-ranging article about all the different faith groups in the university. And they were just wanting to find out how things operated, what was going on, and so on.

[17 : 47] So I agreed. About one minute into the interview, I realized that there was an agenda behind it all. I saw it was a setup. And I was questioned pretty hardly about the Bible's teaching on the role of women.

I was questioned very fiercely on how we operated as CU, how we chose and selected the next committees. All of that was a total hatchet job. And when the article was published, it was front page, distribution of over 20,000 copies around the university, front page, CU in hell.

Now, quite a catchy title, I thought. But the article was a pretty one-sided affair. And taking lots of what I said out of context, it made me look like an absolute idiot.

My words were misrepresented. And all I was doing was explaining Orthodox Christianity on the whole range of issues. Now, that was slander. The CU was dragged through the mud, as was my name.

But it was uncomfortable and unpleasant, even though it was ham-fisted, and anyone reading objectively could see it was such. But it was a major distraction. Hours of meetings with the SU followed.

[19 : 05] But I have no doubt who was really behind it. It wasn't just the Student Union magazine. We have an enemy. And he delights to slander God's people.

Well, such was the nature of the suffering of the church there in Smyrna. Tribulation, poverty, and slander. But note that the church in Smyrna hadn't done anything wrong.

It's one of the two churches of the seven that receives no rebuke whatsoever. They suffer because they're doing things right. And that's hard to take, isn't it?

We often subconsciously expect life to go smoothly if we're honoring Christ. But theirs is the pattern for all who follow Christ.

And we should expect it. If not now, then someday. For Polycarp, it was six decades down the line. But he had absorbed the teaching of this letter.

[20 : 10] And so should we. Know that Christ knows and that he sees more than we can merely observe. There is a reality behind the reality we see.

And Jesus sees it. He knows it. But Jesus doesn't just observe the suffering of his church. He equips them to face it.

This is our second point. Verses 10 and 11. Jesus strengthens his church for suffering to come. Jesus is frank, isn't he?

There is no sugar coating here. He doesn't gloss over things. No. Jesus is realistic and honest about what he calls his people to.

He's realistic and honest about the costliness of following him. Yes, his church has suffered. But he says, verse 10, do not fear what you are about to suffer.

[21 : 11] Two things on the horizon for some of the Smyrna Christians. Prison and death. Prison is the first thing he mentions. He says, behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison that you may be tested for 10 days.

You will have tribulation. Who is the person behind it? Well, again, Jesus reveals the reality. It is the devil himself who is behind the imprisonments of these Christians.

The devil will throw some into prison. But even as that's the case, it is not beyond the scope of God's sovereignty. There is a purpose behind it.

Look at the second half of verse 10. So that you may be tested. When under trial, the genuineness of faith is exposed.

It is tested. The apostle Peter, in his first letter, wrote this, you have been grieved by various trials so that the tested genuineness of your faith may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

[22 : 28] It is in the heat of trial that our faith will be truly tested and will truly shine forth. not before then. I don't know about you, but I often imagine situations or scenarios in life and I think I just wouldn't cope if that happens.

But the Lord doesn't equip us for theoretical situations, but actual ones. In those moments when the trials do come, when the sufferings do come, that is when the testing comes.

And so we pray that in those moments God would strengthen us for those times that we would not fear, but rather would be trusting him.

And he will equip his people for those moments. Jesus reveals the person behind it. He reveals the purpose, but he also reveals that it's not in perpetuity.

Rather, it's a limited suffering. Note what he says in the middle of verse 10, for 10 days, you will have tribulation. Now whether that's 10 literal days or to be taken symbolically as it's a limited period of time, either way it's limited.

[23 : 42] It doesn't go on forever. And it's limited either by the fact they'll be released or because some will be killed. And death is the second thing on the horizon for some of those who receive this letter.

Look on to the end of verse 10. Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life. This is the second imperative, the second instruction given to the church there in Smyrna.

The first was do not fear. And the second is be faithful unto death. And as with all the commands from the Lord, there is a great promise attached.

Be faithful and I will give you the crown of life. The reward for enduring death is life. Life everlasting. Life with God and the new creation.

The believers were not to look at the suffering to come so that they trembled with fear but rather to look through the suffering to come and beyond to the Lord who promised to deliver them.

[24 : 54] To see beyond the suffering itself to what lay beyond it. And that is what conquering would look like for this particular church.

Look at the end of verse 11. The one who conquers, the one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death. death. That is to say that though they may endure terrible sufferings, even death in this world, they would not be touched by the far more terrible and everlasting judgments that will surely come on the day when God will judge all.

The Lord Jesus said elsewhere, Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

That is the perspective that Jesus pressed upon his church in Smyrna and for all today who face persecution and even death for their faith in him.

The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death. And the fact that guarantees this promise is that the Lord Jesus who makes this promise is the one in verse 8 who is the first and the last who died and came to life.

[26 : 27] Jesus has overcome death. He rose again. He lives forever. He defeated it. And that very fact in addition to these words of promise did then and does now bring great comfort to his suffering church.

There is life beyond death in this world. There is a far more terrible judgment to come and you don't fear that if you are Christ's. to the one who conquers will not be hurt by that second death.

And Jesus not only knows the suffering his church faces but he suffered himself. He faced tribulation, poverty, slander.

He faced death but death could not hold him. He is the first fruits of the new creation. The first one resurrected from the dead. The one whose resurrection guarantees the resurrection of all his people.

And so in light of all he's done in light of all he says Jesus tenderly encourages his church. He encourages you in the face of terrible trials.

[27 : 54] Do not fear what is to come. Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life. Nobody else can promise that.

Only Jesus. Only he can give you everlasting life so hold firm to him. Well that was the message to the church in Smyrna.

and it's a message that Polycarp clung to even to the end. And as we close just three implications, three observations on this passage.

First there's always more going on than we can see. That's something we bumped into again and again in this passage. we see things going on from a human point of view.

We see poverty. We see slander, imprisonment, death. But Jesus every time gives us another perspective. He gives us the reality.

[29 : 02] Yes, you're poor but in reality you're rich. Yes, you're being slandered by these people but really Satan is behind it. Yes, you'll be put in prison but really it's the devil who's done that.

Yes, you may die but in reality Jesus gives you everlasting life. Isn't that something to get firmly screwed into our minds?

There's always more going on than we can see with our own eyes. Jesus sees the big picture. He sees reality. He's in control of it all.

So trust him. There's always more going on than we can just see. Second implication, Jesus hasn't lost control if and when we suffer.

Because there's always more going on than we can see, persecution does not mean that Jesus has lost control in a particular situation. In fact, it's often the very thing that Jesus calls us to, isn't it?

[30 : 08] He says, whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. suffering for Christ is part of the Christian life.

But the Lord Jesus who knows all and is in control of all, he says to you, fear not, be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life.

Jesus hasn't lost control if and when we suffer. but thirdly and lastly, conquering means living by Jesus' words and not by sight.

Jesus is risen and ascended but if we're honest, it doesn't much look like it, does it? It doesn't look to us as we look around at the world that Jesus is risen and ascended but that is why God has given us his word.

That's why he's given us the book of Revelation. It's a glimpse of a reality we cannot see. Jesus lifts the curtain on the seen world and he lets us see what's really going on.

[31 : 22] We're called to live by his words not by what we can see. It doesn't look like Jesus is risen and ascended. It doesn't look like Christians are the most privileged people in the world.

It doesn't look like Christians are given the crown of life beyond death. But we're not to live by what we see. We fix our ears on what Jesus says.

We fix our eyes on the unseen crown of life. We live by faith faithful unto death and he will give us the crown of life.

Let's ask for his help to do that shall we? Our Father in heaven you give us your people great promises.

would you please help us to trust your promises to trust your word. We are so limited in what we know and what we see and you the creator God know everything you see everything you see reality and so help us to be a people that live by faith not by sight help us to be a people faithful unto death knowing that beyond lies the crown of life.

[33 : 00] So help us please to be a faithful people strengthen us by your spirit for we ask it in Jesus name. Amen.