

## 2. Faithful Under Fire

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[ 0 : 00 ] Some time ago I came across a truly appalling book with the title A Good Church Guide.

I don't know if any of you have ever seen it, but I dipped into it and as I read it, as I read various extracts from it, I was totally amazed.

Every church, apparently, is brimming with life. Every church is friendly and makes visitors feel at home. Every church is preaching the gospel.

And I wondered, after reading some of it at least, why Britain is such a spiritual desert, if that is the kind of churches which appear to be in this country.

But don't you see how the whole concept is totally flawed? A Good Church Guide. And actually it was worse than that. It gave stars to the churches.

[ 1 : 00 ] Not the kind of stars here, of course, but rather like hotels. We had five-star churches and three-star churches. And as I say, there was all this, little more actually than self-congratulation.

The one thing that was missing from any of these extracts I read, and I didn't read the whole book, it was depressing enough reading the few extracts, the one thing that was missing from any of these churches' self-assessments was Charles Wesley's words, I offered Christ to them.

Because that, after all, is what the church is about. Whether we make it into a Good Church Guide, I hope we never do, because that, as I say, that is simply a kind of self-assessment.

Whether we ever do that or not, I do pray that we will always be a church that will be able to say, we offered Christ to them. Many years ago, John Stott wrote a brief commentary in Revelation 2 and 3, which he entitled, What Christ Thinks of the Church.

And ultimately, that's what matters, isn't it? It's not what books of good church guides, what observers, what members think of the church. It's what the Lord of the church, who walks in the midst of them and upholds them by the word of his power.

[ 2 : 24 ] What does Christ think of the church? So I said two weeks ago, these seven churches in Asia were on a kind of semi-circular route, which a messenger would take the letter to as he landed at Ephesus, and now he's gone northwest to Smyrna and then slightly north again to Pergamum, to these three great cities.

Two great cities, well, three great cities, Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamum, which were centers of Christian churches at the end of the first century. As I said, there were more than seven churches in Asia, seven suggest completeness, and the message is to the whole church throughout the whole of the Christian age until the Lord returns.

Now, Smyrna was a very beautiful city. Indeed, it was called the glory of Asia, and it had splendid temples and great prosperity. It was a center of religion and a center of commerce.

Pergamum, some miles north again, had an 800 feet acropolis with temples to pagan gods in it, and Pergamum was, in fact, the capital of the province.

So, obviously, these churches are placed in cities of great wealth, great influence, and a great deal of religious activity. But I mentioned, of course, the temples to pagan gods, and that's the important thing, as we'll see in a moment or two.

[ 3 : 51 ] In that situation, there's great hardship, and there's many threats to the Christian life.

That's why I'm calling this sermon today Faithful Under Fire.

These Christians were under fire. These Christians were up against it. These Christians were not finding the Christian life easy. So, that's the background, then. The messenger takes the letter, and remember, the letter is the entire book of Revelation, because what we have here, the seven letters, are, if you like, personal notes to the individual churches.

But the message is for all the churches then, and for all the churches now. They want us to talk about three things. First of all, there is an example to follow.

Secondly, there is a warning to listen to. And thirdly, there is a reward to inspire us. So, we have an example, we have a warning, and we have a reward.

So, first of all, let's look at the example to follow. We're going to take these two churches together, because both these churches are warmly commended for being strong under persecution.

[ 5 : 06 ] That's true of both of them. And we'll look at that in a moment. They are suffering for holding fast my name. Verse 13, you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith.

So, let's see what's being said here. An example to follow. First of all, where does persecution come from? When the church is persecuted then, or when the church is persecuted now, where does it come from?

Now, of course, we know very well it comes from the authorities, it comes from the state, or sometimes it comes from other groups who dislike the rise of Christianity and persecute.

We know this through the Barnabas Fund, and many of you, I know, read the products of the Barnabas Fund and contribute to it. But, John is in no doubt where persecution ultimately comes from.

Verse 9, the synagogue of Satan is in Smyrna. Verse 10, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison.

[ 6 : 13 ] Notice, he doesn't say the authorities at Smyrna, he says the devil is about to throw some of you in prison. And then, verse 13, even more strongly, where Satan dwells, and then again, where Satan's throne is.

So, the origin of persecution, the real enemy, is not the state, not dissident groups, but the devil himself, who is determined, having failed to destroy Christ himself, wants to persecute and destroy his church.

Remember Paul on the Damascus Road, who are you, Lord, he says, and the Lord replies, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. So, persecution, whatever the secondary cause, ultimately comes from the devil.

And Paul says in Ephesians 6, we are not wrestling with flesh and blood. Well, of course, we are wrestling with flesh and blood. But you see the point of that, if we only wrestle with flesh and blood, if we only see the human persecutors, then we're not going to understand, and we're not going to see truly what's happening.

Because there is a mystery here, why does God not intervene? Why does God not prevent the persecution? Why does God not rescue the persecuted? Now, I'll come back to that slightly later.

[ 7 : 35 ] But the point is, we need to be aware of, we need to fight the real enemy. Daniel talks about that a lot in the later chapters of his book, the powers wrestling in the heavenly places.

And we can only touch that realm by prayer. After all, we can do an awful lot in our own strength, can't we? We can teach, we can educate, we can do an awful lot of things.

But if we only do them in our own strength, they're going to have no effect. We need to saturate everything we are doing by prayer, don't we? St. William Cooper, the poet, says, Satan trembles when he sees the weakest saint upon his knees.

Upon our knees means we can't do it, but upon our knees means we're in touch with the God who can. So where does persecution come from? It comes from Satan himself, the devil who goes about, as Peter says, like a roaring lion seeking someone who devour.

But what was actually happening? Having seen that it is the devil, what was the method, what was the instrument the devil was actually using?

[ 8 : 49 ] As I suggested two weeks ago, we're almost at the end of the first century. We're in the last decade of the first century, century, and the Roman Empire had grown enormous, stretching from Britain to North Africa, and from Spain to Iraq.

Now that was a problem for the Roman emperors. How were they to unite? How were they to keep control of this vast empire? Now of course we know about the formidable strength of the Roman armies, but a government needs more than an army to keep a nation unified.

unified. And as the empire became bigger, so of course the conceit and the arrogance of the emperors increased. And if the emperor behind all this is Domitian, who was the emperor during the last decade of the first century, we know that he introduced what was called the emperor cult.

Part, of course, from his own megalomania, but the other part was to try to unify the empire. And so the emperor cult grew up.

And among the pagan altars in every city and town was an altar to Rome itself, to the emperor. And the so-called emperor cult was born.

[10:10] That meant that every citizen once a year had to go and burn incense on the altar of Rome and say the words, Caesar is Lord.

Caesar is Lord. Caesar is Lord. Now, we sang the words a moment or two ago, didn't we? Jesus is Lord, the cry that echoes through creation.

For those brave Christians in Smyrna and Pergamum, it wasn't just a chorus to sing, it was a reality. Because if they refused to say the word, Caesar is Lord, and instead proclaimed that Jesus is Lord, that would cost them their lives.

A declaration. You see, when we say Jesus is Lord, it is a declaration of loyalty. It's not just stating a fact, it's declaring our loyalty. A declaration of loyalty to the name which is above every name.

And we read of Antipas, verse 13, my faithful witness. This is the first recorded martyr in the churches in Asia. It's very interesting, Antipas is called my faithful witness.

[11:18] Glance back across the page, verse 5 of chapter 1, Jesus Christ, the faithful witness. In other words, Antipas closely identified with his Lord.

And then, of course, as far as Domitian and his officials were concerned, so much the worse for Antipas. But look what follows in verse 5, the firstborn of the dead and the ruler of the kings on the earth.

And that's the point of chapter 1, to encourage such Christians under persecution. Now, we in this country are not subject to that kind of persecution.

We are not in danger of our lives. We can come here, we can praise God, we can expound his word, we can sing that Jesus is Lord. The worst we will have is sneering and cynicism and ridicule. I'll come back to that in a moment, because you may well say, well, this is fine for those Christians, say, in Pakistan and elsewhere were being persecuted. But what does it have to say to us? I'll come back to that in a minute.

[12:26] Persecution comes from the devil. The particular instrument he uses here is the power of the state. In our country, he uses, of course, the power of propaganda, the power of cynicism.

And later on in Revelation, in chapter 13, the devil summons two beasts. One is the beast from the sea, the persecuting power of the state. The other beast, the beast from the earth, speaks like a lion, but looks like a lamb.

That's the beast of propaganda and false teaching. And that is the beast we know so well in this country and have known so well for the past hundred years or so. The beast of false teaching.

We're not facing the beast of persecution, but we are certainly facing the beast of false teaching. We'll come to that in a moment. But the question that arises, is the Lord in control?

And that, I think, is the point of verse 10. Do not fear what you're about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you in prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation.

[13:37] Now, you notice what that's saying. Ten days, of course, like all the figures in Revelation, is a symbolic figure. But you see what it means? The devil is not in control. He may think he's initiating this.

He may think he's calling the tune. The point is, the Lord already has determined the period. It is a limited time. This is true in all the distressing experiences of life.

Notice the words that occur all the way through letters. I know. The Lord is saying this to every Christian throughout the world, wherever they may be, whatever their circumstance would be, I know where you are.

I understand. And in these churches, under persecution, comes this message, the devil will throw you into prison.

For ten days, you will have tribulation. Now, we know it was longer than ten days, because probably already in the church at Smyrna was a young man called Polycarp, whom we learn from the writers in the second century, probably an associate of John himself, who much later, at the age of 86, was to be martyred for his faith.

[14:53] So you see, it was a long time it was going on. And Polycarp speaks, as he was martyred, he says this. He was told, if you simply acknowledge the emperor, you'll be saved.

And this is what he says, Eighty and six years have I served Christ, and he has done me no wrong. How can I now blaspheme my king who has saved me?

The words of the aged Polycarp, who probably already was in the church at Smyrna when these words were written. Now, the relevance to us, of course, is this. We are not, in this country, suffering persecution.

And sometimes people say, well, how would we stand up to it if we did? Now, remember that's very important to think about that. Because grace is never given for possible circumstances.

Grace is only given for the circumstances we are in. And on the last day, the Lord will not say, oh, you weren't persecuted. He'll basically say, were you faithful where I placed you?

[16:01] And as we all know, the ordinary experiences of living, the sheer wear and tear of being a Christian in the world, the sheer frustration often can be agonizing and difficult to put up with.

Grace is given, not for every possible circumstance that may arise, but for the circumstances we are in. So these passages are telling us, pray for our persecuted brothers and sisters.

Support them in every way we can. And pray for the, and indeed pray for the restraining of those who persecute them. But he's also saying to us, whatever circumstance we may be in, there will be grace given to persevere.

I think that's the important thing. Faithfulness where we are, not faithfulness where we might be, or could have been. So there is an example to follow.

Wherever we are, there's a call to faithfulness. But then there is a warning to listen to. Interestingly, just as we leave Smyrna, Smyrna is one of two churches, the other one Philadelphia, whom we'll come to later.

[17:12] They are the only two churches who are not given any condemnation. And we'll look at that later, particularly in connection with Philadelphia. But Pergamum, so faithful under persecution, verse 14, I have a few things against you.

You have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam. You see, they had been staunch under persecution, but they had failed to stand up to another attack, the attack of false teaching.

And that is so relevant to us today, is it not? Now, John uses the story of Balaam to show this is not a new problem. This has been a problem going right back into the early days of the Old Testament.

The story of Numbers 22-25, Israelites on their way to the promised land came up against Moab.

And Balaam was sent to curse them, and God turned the curses into blessings.

But the particular reference here is Balaam having failed to seduce them one way. Then Moabite girls are sent to seduce the Israelite warriors, to weaken their resistance, to weaken their standing for God.

[18:27] So what we have here are people who basically notice to sacrifice the idols and practice sexual immorality. And the Nicolaitans, again, we met them in Ephesus a few weeks ago.

Basically, the teaching is this. Now, you and I are never going to meet a Nicolaitan, or a Valentinian, or other such people who were around in the first century. We are going to meet their contemporary equivalents.

Telling them to practice sexual immorality. We know this only too well, but this is the issue, not least in the Church of Scotland. Don't listen to the Word of God.

Water it down to suit society. And that's what the teaching of Balaam and the teaching of the Nicolaitans were about. You see, the big division is between those who are subject to the Word of God and use that to critique society.

And those who simply bow down to society's norms and their word becomes a weak echo of society's views.

[19:37] You see, we cannot pick and choose. Either the whole Gospel is true or none of it's true. It's a seamless garment. If we pull out a thread somewhere, the whole garment will unravel.

And that's one of the great messages of the seven churches. We cannot pick and choose. We can't say, oh, we're a church that's loving. We don't care very much about doctrine. We can't, on the other hand, like Ephesus, for example, say we're very strong on doctrine.

We're not very good on love. We can't say, on the one hand, we're great at standing up to persecution, but we love these awfully nice people who come and tell us wrong teachings.

We can't do that. What the Lord says, verse 16, Therefore repent, if not I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.

What is the sword of my mouth? The sword of my mouth surely is the Word of God. The word which, as Hebrews says, cuts right into our hearts. So, unless the church is subject to the Word of God, then it's in great danger.

[ 20 : 46 ] Pergamum did not take this seriously. Pergamum ignored the warning, and Pergamum, like the other churches, simply disappeared.

So, you see, this is a warning to us. We must guard against the teaching of the Nicolaitans and Balaam and their modern equivalents, because if not, we'll die.

It's no accident, after all, that those churches which most trumpet so-called liberal teaching, they have nothing to give to the world.

After all, if you... After all, why bother getting up on a Sunday and coming to a place that's simply going to echo your own opinions? You don't need that. You need the radical Word of God, the sword of His mouth, that which is going to change, which is going to transform.

So, we have an example. Stand firm. Persevere to the end. Whether it's persecution or cynicism, or simply the wear and tear and the troubles and tragedies of everyday life.

[ 21 : 51 ] The warning. Don't give way to false teachers. Don't allow them to seduce the church. The word seduce is deliberate, because that's the image that John uses.

But thirdly, there is a promise to inspire. Or rather, two promises, because each of the churches is given a promise, which is taken, of course, from the image or the vision of the risen Lord in the first chapter.

The promise is ultimately eternal life with Christ for all who persevere. But the different blessings to the churches. The different promises, the different rewards, show different aspects of this.

And first of all, 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.

Notice, and then earlier on, be faithful to death, and I will give you a crown of life. There is a positive promise. The metaphor here is from the races, which the New Testament apostles often take their metaphors from.

[ 23 : 00 ] The crown that's given at the end of the marathon, at the end of the strenuous race, be faithful, and I will give you the crown of life, the reward, the enjoyment, at the end of all the effort.

There's also a negative promise, freedom from judgment, the one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death. And the second death is mentioned later on in the book.

That is the death which comes to those who have rejected the gift of life. This is the second death. I want you to notice, though, verse 11, the one who conquers, the one who perseveres.

We'll come back to this in Philadelphia in a few weeks' time, but, as I say, Smyrna gets star days in its report. There are no criticisms, no complaints, and yet, even in Smyrna, it's necessary to persevere and conquer.

In other words, we may be in a church that is living, that is a gospel church, that is faithful to the Lord. I'm not saying a faultless church, faithful to the Lord, faithful to his word, faithful in prayer, and faithful in witness, and faithful in standing up against false teaching.

[ 24 : 23 ] That's not enough. We personally, these things have to be true about us. And so often, it's possible to be carried along by the crowd and not really faithful and loyal in our hearts.

And that's the important thing here. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.

The reward is eternal life. Death in this world followed by eternal life in the next.

And remember, this is not ultimately simply a promise to martyrs. All of us will die unless Christ returns before then. Everyone has hardships and problems.

And every one of us is conscious of the fleetingness of life. the one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death. The second promise is the one given to Pergamum, verse 17.

To the one who conquers, I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.

[ 25 : 29 ] The hidden manna, of course, is the food of heaven, which is Christ himself. I am the bread of life, says Jesus, back in the Gospel, Gospel of John. And this is the word which sustains.

I will give some of the hidden manna. See how appropriate that is in Pergamum. These false teachers were coming offering fast food, so to speak. More exciting, more exotic food than the word of God.

You see what the risen Lord is saying, I will give you the food that will really sustain you. The food of the word which will cause you to be strong, which will cause you to grow, which will give you life, that's true life.

The white stone, once again, the same metaphor, the white stone was a kind of token which admitted you to a banquet. So you see what he's saying.

These false teachers may appear to be coming with something more exotic, something more exciting, something more progressive. Look, stick to the hidden manna. That will sustain you, that will feed you, and that is a feast.

[ 26 : 34 ] And get this right through scripture, when wisdom in Proverbs chapter 9 invites to a feast. It's a true feast, whereas folly invites us to bread and water only at wisdom, wisdom that is wine and meat and all the luxuries.

And the hidden, and the whites with a new name written on the stone. Now, the commentators differ as to what this new name is.

Some think it's a new name of Christ. I don't think that's so likely. I think it's more likely that the name on the stone will be the special name of that person's relationship with the Lord.

My name is written on his hands. While Christ loves us all, Christ loves each one of us individually. And this new name, it seems to me, which no one knows except the one who receives it, is the own particular relationship with the Lord which every one of his people will have.

[ 27 : 38 ] Our relationship with the Lord is not collapsed into some kind of collective sort of relationship. It's really more Buddhism than Christianity. And some of the hymns get, Till in the ocean of thy love we lose ourselves in heaven above.

That's not gospel, that's Buddhism. No, a new name which only the person can receive. And that name signifies the special relationship with the Lord.

So we have an example. We have a warning and we have a promise. As I finish, let me just say two things. Expect opposition. There will not necessarily be persecution in the way some of our brothers or sisters are facing it.

What I would say is if that were to come to any one of us here, then the Lord will give the needed grace at the time when it comes. God, as I say, God doesn't give us grace in anticipation of what might come.

But there will be difficulties, there will be problems. The second thing is keep going. Persevere because Christ is coming. He is the firstborn, the ruler of the kings of the earth.

[ 28 : 47 ] He has the keys of death and of Hades. Let's follow the example, heed the warning, and look forward to the reward which is nothing less and nothing more than the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

Amen. Let's pray. Father, we realize how weak and inadequate we are.

We all have our special weaknesses. We all have our frailties. We praise you that ultimately the Lord Jesus Christ holds the seven stars in his hand, walks among the seven lampstands.

He is the one who will give the needed grace. He is the one who will stay with us throughout the journey. He is the one who himself has already conquered and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

And so encourage us and challenge us and help us to be more truly your people in the days to come. Amen.